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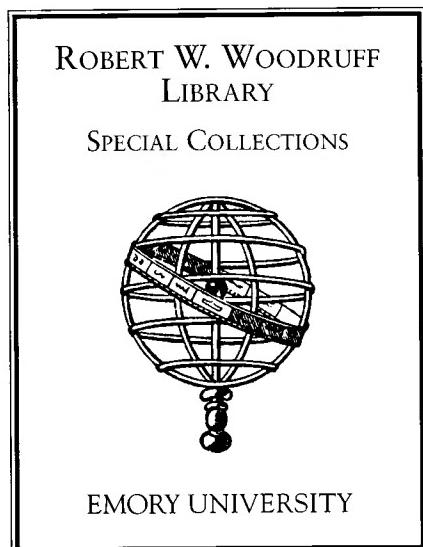
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THE SLAVES OF PARIS.

P A R T I.

B L A C K M A I L .

I.

THE 8th of February, 186—, was one of the most severe days of the winter, for at noon Chevalier's thermometer, the favourite Parisian oracle, marked 9°03 degrees centigrade below zero. The sky was dark and loaded with snow, and the rain of the previous day had frozen on the pavement, rendering locomotion so perilous that both cabs and omnibuses had ceased to run. The city wore altogether a most dreary aspect.

The Parisians, as a rule, are not apt to devote much attention to the starving poor. They fancy, perhaps, that sufficient crumbs fall from the tables of a million diners to satisfy the hunger of all the indigent; and yet in the winter, when blocks of ice float down the Seine, thought instinctively comes of those who are destitute and shivering, and they are naturally commiserated. So true is this, that on the particular 8th of February we spoke of, the landlady of the Hôtel du Pérou, Madame Loupias, a sharp hard woman from Auvergne, actually gave her lodgers a thought, which curiously enough had no connection either with raising their rents or exacting payment of arrears. “How bitterly cold it is,” she said to her husband, who was filling the stove with coal. “Cold enough to frighten a white bear. In weather like this I always feel anxious—especially since that winter when we found a lodger hanging to the rafters upstairs. His suicide cost us fully fifty francs, not to mention the sneers and accusations of the neighbours. You really ought to go upstairs, and see what the folks in the attics are about.”

“Pooh,” rejoined her husband, “they've gone out to warm themselves.”

“Do you think so?”

“I'm sure of it. Old Father Taintaine went off at daybreak; and soon afterwards I saw M. Paul Violaine come down. Rose is the only one up there now, and I fancy she has sense enough to stay in bed.”

“Oh! as for her,” rejoined Madame Loupias spitefully, “I've no compassion for her. Unless I'm greatly mistaken she'll soon be leaving Monsieur Paul to his own devices. She's by far too good-looking for such a place as ours.”

The Hôtel du Pérou is situated in the Rue de la Huchette, at a score of paces from the Place du Petit Port. There is a touch of cruel irony about its name for none would think of associating “Peru”—the synonym of

"silver"—with such a sordid building, having a narrow muddy alley as its entrance, and with windows so grimed with filth, that at a glance the passer-by would rightly judge : "This is the home of poverty and want." At the first look, moreover, the aspect of the house suggests a thieves' den ; but this is not the case, for, as times go, it is fairly honest. Indeed it is one of those lodging-places—becoming yearly fewer in number—where shame-faced paupers, folk who have seen "better times," vanquished combatants in the struggle for life, find shelter and a bed in exchange for their last crown. Here they take refuge, like the ship-wrecked mariner on a rock, here they at least have a moments' breathing time, and as soon as strength returns start off anew. No matter how wretched a man might be, it would be quite impossible for him to think seriously of abiding for any length of time in the Hôtel du Pérou. By means of frames, covered with sail-cloth and second-hand wall-paper, each storey is divided into a number of little cells, which Madame Loupias dignifies as rooms. The frames are disjointed, the paper is falling into shreds, and yet hideous as these cells are, they seem superb in comparison with the two attics, which merely have sky-light windows, and the ceilings of which are so low that it is almost impossible for the occupants to stand upright. Here the only furniture is a bed with a sea-weed mattress, a rickety table and two chairs. Such as they are, however, the attics are let for two-and-twenty francs apiece per month. But then, as Madame Loupias says, it should be remembered that both of them have chimneys, and this is true—each garret having a hole in the wall, though grate and mantelpiece alike are wanting. However the worthy woman's tenants are not exacting, and in proof of this the garrets are never vacant.

In one of these attics, on that cold February day, we find the young woman whom Loupias called Rose. Her beauty was beyond all question. She was just nineteen ; her hair—marvellously abundant—dazzled one with its golden gleams, and her skin was fair and white. Long lashes attenuated the metallic sparkle of her large blue eyes, while her lips, which on parting disclosed small pearly teeth, seemed only intended for smiles and kisses. Instead of remaining in bed as the landlord had suggested, she had risen, and throwing the soiled, darned counterpane over her shoulders, had installed herself near the fire-place. Why there you may ask, rather than elsewhere ? She could scarcely have hoped to warm herself, for the only signs of a fire were two smouldering bits of wood, each as large as one's fist, which exhaled between them about as much heat as a lighted cigar. No matter. Crouching on the dirty rag which Madame Loupias called a hearth-rug, Rose shuffled a pack of cards, meaning to consult them as to her future destiny ; and, after all, it was only natural she should seek to console herself from the sufferings of to-day by the promises of to-morrow.

She was so absorbed in telling her own fortune that she did not seem to feel the cold which was nipping her fingers. In a semi-circle before her she had disposed the flabby dirty cards, and, in accordance with custom, counted them three by three with her forefinger. Each of those she pointed at had, of course, a favourable or unfavourable meaning, and she rejoiced or lamented accordingly. "One—two—three," she was saying, "a fair young man—that must be Paul. One—two—three, endeavours. One—two—three, ah ! money for me. One—two—three, no, disappointment. One—two—three, the nine of spades, that means sorrow, want, and starvation. Always that nine of spades, at every deal !" To tell the truth she looked as worried as if she positively knew of some impending disaster.

However she speedily recovered herself and set about shuffling the cards again. She carefully cut them with her left hand, spread them out as previously, and began to count once more, one—two—three. Ah ! this time the cards shewed themselves more propitious, and carried her off to the fairy realm of hope. "Some one loves you," they said in that particular language of theirs which Mademoiselle Leuornand, so deftly expounded for the benefit of the Great Napoleon, predicting Jena and Austerlitz, and warning him of Waterloo and St. Helena. "Ay, some one loves you—loves you very dearly. You will go on a journey ; a letter will reach you from a dark young man—a young man who is very wealthy."

This young man was personated by the knave of clubs. "Always the same," muttered Rose, "always that dark young fellow—fate wills it. How can I resist ?" At the same time, rising to her feet, she drew from a crack in the wall above the fireplace a letter, folded into a little square, and greatly soiled and rumpled, for it had been perused over and over again. For the twentieth time indeed since the previous afternoon she read as follows :—

"MADEMOISELLE, I have seen you and I love you—on my word of honour ! The filthy den where you now hide your beauty is no fit place for you. A charming apartment—lemon wood and ebony furniture—awaits you in the Rue de Douai. I am always plain spoken in business matters—the lease will be made out in your name. Think it over, make any inquiries you like, my references are all first rate. I am not yet of age, but I shall be so in five months and three days from now, and shall then be able to do as I please with the property left me by my mother. Besides, my father is old and infirm, and by careful strategy we might have him pronounced by the courts to be unfit to manage his fortune.

"Shall I warn the dressmaker to be in readiness ?

"During the next five days I shall—from 4 till 6 p.m.—await your decision in my carriage at the corner of the Place du Petit Pont.

"GASTON DE GANDELU."

This ridiculous, revolting letter, well worthy of one of those young idiots whom the Parisians at that time contemptuously called "*petits crêvés*," did not at all seem to shock Rose. On the contrary she thought it delightful—as charming, indeed, as any sonnet addressed by Petrarch to Laura. "If I dared !" she muttered longingly. "Ah ! if I only dared."

For a moment she remained pensive, her forehead resting on her hand, when suddenly a lithe quick step resounded on the creaking stairs. "He !" she exclaimed, affrighted, "Paul !" and with a movement of alarm, cat-like in its speed and precision, she slipped the letter back into its hiding-place.

She was none too quick, for the very next moment Paul Violaine entered the room. He was a young man of three-and-twenty or thereabouts, of slender build, but in height admirably proportioned. His oval face was of that clear pale cream colour peculiar to certain races of the south. A small silky moustache shaded his upper lip, just sufficiently to impart an air of manhood to his expression. His fair hair curled naturally above an intelligent forehead, and, as a contrast, lent additional lustre to his large black eyes. His handsome features—of a more striking character, perhaps, than even those of Rose—were enhanced by a distinguished air, which rightly or wrongly is supposed only to pertain to those of noble birth. Mother Loupias always pretended that the tenant of her attic impressed her as much as if he were a prince in disguise. At this moment, however, he was

but a sorry prince indeed. Clean as his clothes were they told a painful story of poverty—not that poverty which shows itself in the sunlight and lives on public charity, but that far more cruel want which blushes when commiserated, which tries to hide itself and is ashamed to speak. In this arctic temperature he wore a flimsy black dress suit—all but thread-bare with use and brushing. True enough, he had in addition a light overcoat, but at the most it would have been fit only for summer wear, having about as much consistency as a spider's web. His shoes no doubt were superbly blackened, but they had plainly trudged far and wide in search of fortune.

As he entered the room he laid or rather dropped on the bed a roll of paper, which he had been carrying under his arm. "Nothing!" said he in a tone of bitter disappointment, "still nothing."

Forgetting her cards on the carpet, the young woman started to her feet. The smile which had lighted up her face, anon, was gone, and she wore a look of utter weariness. "What!" she exclaimed, feigning surprise which she was far from feeling, "what, nothing? Not after all you told me when you went out this morning?"

"This morning, Rose, I hoped. I hoped and told you to believe. But I have been deceived, or rather I deceived myself. I looked on commonplace assurances as positive promises. Here, in Paris, folks are not even charitable enough to answer you with a downright 'no.' They listen to you with an air of interest, place themselves at your disposal, but as soon as you are out of their sight they forget you. Words—mere words! That's the only coin at the service of the wretched in this God-forsaken city!"

There was a long pause. Paul was too absorbed with his own thoughts to note the contemptuous manner in which Rose stood watching him. She seemed indignant to find him so helplessly resigned. "Well, we're in a nice position and no mistake," she said at last. "What is to become of us?"

"Ah! do I know?"

"Then it's all over. Yesterday, while you were away—I didn't tell you of it so as not to worry you needlessly—mother Loupias came up and asked for the eleven francs' rent we owe her. If she isn't paid in three days she'll bundle us out of doors—so she declared; and she'll keep her word, you may depend on it. Yes, she'll turn us out, and all the more cheerfully as she longs to see me in the streets, for she hates me, the hideous old hag."

"To be alone in the world," muttered Paul, "alone, abandoned, without a relative or friend—without any one to assist me!"

"We haven't a copper left," resumed Rose, with ferocious persistency. "Last week I sold the last clothes I had, save these on my back. There's no firewood left, and we haven't had a morsel to eat since yesterday morning."

Paul only answered these words, which seemed like so many stinging taunts, by clasping his forehead with both hands as if trying to press from his brain some idea that might save them.

"Ah! it's a fine state of affairs," continued Rose, with imperturbable determination. "For my part, I think it would be as well to find some means, to devise some expedient, anything, no matter what—"

Hearing this, Paul hastily threw off his overcoat. "Here," said he, "take this to the pawnshop."

But the young woman did not budge. "Is that all you can think of to help us out of our difficulties?" she coldly asked.

"They'll lend you three francs on it. We shall, at least, have enough to buy some wood and some bread."

"And when the wood and bread have gone?"

"When they've gone? But before—we'll see—I'll reflect, devise something. Everything depends on gaining time. I shall end by breaking through this fatal circle. Success will follow, and with success a fortune. But we must learn to wait."

"Wait! How can we wait?"

"No matter—do what I tell you, and to-morrow—"

Had Paul been less absorbed, he would have divined from the expression on Rose's face that she was determined to provoke him. "To-morrow!" said she, with increasing bitterness of irony. "To-morrow! Always to-morrow! Why we've lived on that word for months. Come, Paul, you are a mere child; it's time you had courage enough to look the truth in the face. What will they lend me on this old coat? Not more than three francs, if that. Now, how long can we live on three francs? Say three days. And then? Don't you understand? You are too poorly clad to be well received. Well-dressed folks are the only ones who are listened to. When a man wants to obtain anything, he ought to look as if he didn't need it. Now, where can you go in your swallow tails without an overcoat? You would look ridiculous—why you wouldn't dare shew yourself in the street."

"Be quiet, I beg you," interrupted Paul. "Ah! I see it only too clearly now; you are like everyone else. You look on failure as if it were a crime. Formerly you had confidence in me; you did not speak like this."

"Ah! formerly I didn't know—"

"No, Rose, no—it wasn't a question of knowledge, but one of love—you loved me then. Good Heavens! have I not tried everything? I have gone almost from door to door offering my compositions—those melodies you sung so well. I have tried to find pupils on every side. What more would you have done if you had been in my place? Come, tell me."

As he spoke, Paul grew more and more animated, whilst Rose, on the contrary, affected an irritating air of calmness. "I don't know," she said at last; "and, yet, it seems to me that if I were a man I should never allow the woman I said I loved to lack the merest necessities of life—no, never. I would find work—"

"I am not a mechanic, unfortunately," rejoined Paul; "I have no manual calling."

"Then I would learn one. What can one earn by carrying a mason's hod? It's hard work, no doubt, but it's not difficult to learn. You have great talents according to your own account—I don't deny it; but if I were a great composer, and had no bread at home, I should go and play in the streets and cafés, go and sing in the court-yards. At all events, I would procure money somehow or other, no matter what it might cost me."

"Rose, you forget that I am an honest man."

"Really! You think I want you to steal! Dear me, that answer of yours is just fit for those who fail to make their way, simply because they lack skill or nerve. They go about dressed in rags, with empty stomachs and aching hearts, but they draw themselves erect to say, 'I am an honest man.' As if the men who are wealthy were all of them arrant knaves. As if no one could make his fortune without being a rascal! Come, you are really too ridiculous!"

She spoke in a ringing voice, and infernal boldness glittered in her eyes. Plainly enough she was one of those redoubtable, wilful creatures, strong in the spirit of evil, who can lead a weak man to the edge of a precipice, push

him over, and forgot him, before he has even reached the bottom. Her sarcasm roused the worst side of Paul's nature. The hot blood of anger mounted to his brow. "Why can't you do something yourself?" he asked. "Why don't you work?"

"I? Oh! that's a very different matter. I wasn't made to work!"

With a gesture of rage, and with uplifted hand, Paul sprang forward. "You wretch!" he cried—"you miserable wretch!"

"No—not a wretch," she answered. "I am only hungry."

Having reached this point, it seemed certain that the quarrel would have some fatal finish, when suddenly an unexpected sound was heard, and caused the young couple to turn round. Their attic door was open, and on the threshold stood an old man, who was watching them with a paternal smile. He was tall, but slightly bowed. His nose was very red, and his prominent cheek bones were almost as highly coloured. But little else could be seen of his face, for he wore a long, uncared-for, grizzly beard. His eyes, moreover, were hidden behind common coloured spectacles, a black ribbon being twined round the iron mountings. Everything in his appearance indicated misery and slovenliness. His greasy, shapeless coat, with its large ragged pockets, bore traces of all the walls it had rubbed against whenever its wearer had imbibed a drop too much. The old fellow was apparently one of those careless bibbers who sleep as comfortably in their clothes on the ground as on their pallet. Paul and Rose recognised him at once. They had often met him on the stairs, and they knew that he lived in the neighbouring garret, and was known as Father Tantaine.

At sight of him, Paul remembered that every word could be heard from one attic to the other, and the idea that the old fellow had been listening fairly exasperated him. "What do you wish, sir?" he asked roughly. "And who gave you permission to come in here without knocking?"

Threatening as was the young fellow's tone, it did not at all seem to offend or disconcert the old man. "I should be speaking an untruth," he answered, "if I didn't admit that, happening to be at home, I just heard you two settling your private affairs—"

"Sir!"

"Wait a bit, impetuous youth! As I was saying, I heard you begin to quarrel, and really, now, I wasn't so much surprised. When there's no hay in the rack, why the best bred horses will fight together. I'm old enough to know all that."

He spoke in a most benignant tone, and seemed quite oblivious of the fact that he was intruding on his neighbours' privacy.

"Well, sir," said Paul. "Then, now you know to what depth of abasement an honest man, when pressed by poverty, may fall. Are you satisfied?"

"Come, come," replied the old fellow. "There you are, losing your temper. If I dropped in, like this, without warning, it was because I felt that neighbours ought to assist one another—especially in such positions as ours. As soon as I heard what your little worries were, I said to myself, 'I must help those young folks out of their trouble.'"

This declaration, this promise of help coming from such a seedy old raggamuffin, seemed so supremely absurd to Rose that she could not repress a smile. She thought, no doubt, that their old neighbour was about to open his purse, and offer them a franc or two—half his fortune, perhaps. Paul had a similar idea; but he, at least, was touched by this simple and yet generous kindness, knowing that the value of money depends upon

circumstances, and that the single franc which keeps a pauper alive for a couple of days is a million times more precious than a thousand franc note to a wealthy man. "Ah," said he, plainly softened, "what can you do for us, sir?"

"Who knows!"

"You see how destitute we are—we need everything. Are we not utterly wrecked?"

Father Tantaine raised his arms to Heaven, as if Paul were guilty of blasphemy. "Wrecked?" said he. "Ah! the pearl lying in the far sea depths—ignorant of its own value—is lost, no doubt, unless indeed some hardy diver finds it. The divers certainly are poor, and not accustomed to adorn themselves with pearls; but then they know their worth, and dispose of them to dealers in precious stones." He finished with a little laugh, the sense of which naturally escaped these young folks, who, albeit eager and covetous, with the seed of evil instincts in their minds, were yet destitute of experience, and ignorant of the ways of the world.

"Well, sir," resumed Paul, "I should be showing misplaced foolish pride if I refused your generous offer."

"Quite right; and as that is the case, the first thing to see to is to procure a good meal. You must have firing as well, for it is bitterly cold here. My old bones are half frozen. By-and-by we'll think of the clothes you need."

"Ah! all that," sighed Rose, "would require a large sum of money."

"Well, and who says I can't provide it?" So speaking, Father Tantaine unbuttoned his coat, and from the inner pocket drew forth a dirty strip of paper, which was pinned to the lining.

"A five hundred franc note!" cried Rose in amazement.

"Precisely, my beauty," answered the old man triumphantly.

Paul did not speak; but had he seen one of the rails of the chair he was leaning against blossom forth in flowers and foliage, he would not have been more astonished. How did such a large sum happen to be in this old raggamuffin's possession? How had he obtained this note? The idea of a crime, of at least a theft, was so natural under the circumstances, that it occurred to both the young folks at the same time. They exchanged a painfully significant glacee, and Paul, losing countenance, flushed scarlet to the ears. The old man had divined their suspicions. "Ah! ah!" said he, without appearing in the least degree shocked, "wicked ideas, eh? It's true that five hundred franc notes don't as a rule crop up spontaneously in pockets like mine; but I came by this one honestly, I can promise you."

Rose was not listening—indeed what did she care for the explanation? The note was there, and that was all she needed. She had taken it in her hands and fingered it as if the touch of the crisp paper imparted the most delightful sensations.

"I must tell you," added Father Tantaine, "that I am employed by a lawyer."

"Indeed."

"Yes, and you ought to feel flattered. People are not often assisted by a lawyer's clerk. My mission, as a rule, is to grind money out of folks, not to help them. I collect debts for several of my master's clients, and it so happens that I often have large sums by me, with a long interval before me to account for them. It can't inconvenience me then to lend you five hundred francs for a certain time."

Paul stood hesitating between the suggestions of want and the qualms of conscience—as moved as is always the case when a momentous decision has to be arrived at. “No,” he began at last; “really, I cannot accept. My duty—”

“Ah, my dear,” interrupted Rose, “that is not worthy of you. Don’t you see that your refusal distresses our neighbour?”

“She is right!” cried Father Tantaine. “Come, it’s settled. And now, my pretty one, make haste and fetch the grub. Come, it’s past four o’clock already.”

It was now Rose’s turn to start and blush, as if the old man had guessed her secret. “Four o’clock!” she muttered, thinking of her letter. However she hastened to obey, and going to the old looking-glass, arranged her ragged clothes almost gracefully. Then taking up the bank-note, she went off in triumph.

“A handsome young woman and no mistake,” said Father Tantaine, with a knowing air. “Quite a beauty, and very intelligent, too. Ah! if she were well advised, she’d make her way.”

Paul offered no rejoinder. He was trying to collect his scattered ideas, and now that Rose no longer influenced him, he felt positively frightened. He thought he distinguished something singularly ominous about the person of the so-called lawyer’s clerk. When before had any one ever seen old fellows of this description offering bank-notes to utter strangers? Surely this generosity must cloak some mystery, and he, Paul, might find himself compromised. “Thinking the matter over,” he said firmly, “I feel that it’s quite impossible for me to accept such a large sum from you. Who knows if I shall ever be able to refund you?”

“Good! So now you are doubting of yourself and your own abilities. That isn’t the way to succeed, believe me. If you have so far failed, it is simply because you lack experience. In future you’ll no doubt do better. Poverty, my lad, fashions a man just as straw ripens medlars. To begin with, I have confidence in you. As for these five hundred francs, you may return them at your leisure. I am in no hurry for them, only you must pay me six per cent. interest, and give me your note-of-hand.”

“Like that,” stammered Paul.

“Agreed. I look upon the affair as an ordinary business transaction.”

Paul was such a simpleton that the idea of a note-of-hand reassured him, as if his signature below a bill stamp could serve any other purpose than that of depriving the strip of paper of any such value as it possessed before it was written upon. On his side, Father Tantaine rummaged about in his pockets, till at last—just by chance, of course—he came upon a bill stamp which would precisely suit the purpose they had in view. “Now,” said he, “take a pen and write as follows: ‘On the eighth of next June I will pay to M. Tantaine or to his order the sum of five hundred and thirty francs (underline, please), value received.’ Now, date; your address, mind, and signature.”

The young fellow was just appending the final flourish to his name when Rose reappeared laden with provisions. She was so radiant, so unlike her usual self, that, extraordinary as the adventure of the bank-note might be, it hardly explained the transformation. Surely something else must have happened to impart that strange expression to her eyes. But Paul gave her no attention. He was watching the old clerk who, after perusing the note, was stowing it away in his pocket with as much care as if it had borne the signature of Rothschild or Oppenheim.

"It is understood, sir," said Paul, "that the date is merely a formality. It is barely likely I shall be able to save enough in four months to recoup you for your kind advance."

Father Tantaine smiled benignantly. "What would you say," asked he, "if, after lending you these five hundred francs, I enabled you to pay me back before a month is over?"

"What, sir, you would be able—"

"Ah, my dear fellow, I myself am of little or no account. You can see that for yourself. But I have a friend with a long arm. If I had only listened to him, years ago, I shouldn't be lodging at the *Hôtel du Pérou* now-a-days. Would you like to see that friend of mine?"

"Would I like to see him! Why, I should be a fool to throw away such a chance."

"Well, I shall see my friend to-night, and will speak to him about you. Call on him to-morrow at noon precisely. If you create a favourable impression, and he decides to help you—why, you may look upon your fortune as made." So saying he produced a visiting card, and handed it to Paul, adding, "My friend's name is B. Mascarot, and this is his address."

While this conversation was going on, Rose, with marvellous dexterity, had transformed chaos into order and completed her preparations. The table was spread—a table well worthy of the hovel—set out with broken plates, whilst the provisions remained in their paper wrappers, there being no dishes in the establishment. A bright fire blazed away in the chimney, and a couple of candles, one of them in the hotel candlestick, and the other emerging from the neck of a cracked bottle, gaily illuminated the festive scene. In comparison with ordinary aspects, the sight was superb, and Paul looked round him with satisfaction. Business was disposed of, and misgivings had flown away. "Let us take our seats," said he. "What can we call this—breakfast, or dinner? Well, never mind. Come, Rose, to your place; and you, my best of neighbours, I trust you will do us the favour of sharing the repast we owe to your timely help."

But although the feast, as Father Tantaine declared, looked very tempting indeed, he begged to be excused. He was not very hungry, as it happened, and besides, he had an important appointment for half-past five, quite at the other end of Paris. "Moreover," said he to Paul, "it is indispensable I should see Mascarot this evening. I must inform him of your visit, and try and influence him in your favour."

Rose certainly did not care for the old fellow's company. Ugly, dirty, and wretched-looking as he was, he inspired her with a feeling of repulsion which gratitude could not overcome. And besides, although she could not see his eyes, she instinctively divined the keen, searching glance which his spectacles concealed—a glance piercing enough to read her most secret thoughts. Still, in a feline way, she begged him with a pretty purr to remain and share the meal. Father Tantaine, however, was not to be persuaded, and after once more reminding Paul that it was essential he should be punctual at the appointment on the morrow, he left the room, cheerily exclaiming, "Until we meet again. A good appetite, my friends!"

Once outside on the landing, however—with the garret door closed behind him—the old man paused, leaning on the balusters, and listened. The turtle doves, as he called them, were very merry, and their laughter and babble resounded through the house. And, after all, why not? After frightful anguish Paul had found comparative security. He had the address of a man who might make his fortune in his pocket, and on the corner of the

table lay the change out of the bank-note, a little pile of gold and silver, seemingly inexhaustible in a moment of gay illusions. As for Rose, she could not cease laughing at the thought of the old clerk, whom she set down in her mind as a grotesque old idiot. "Courage, my pretty ones," muttered Father Tantaine, "courage! Laugh while you can. 'Twill perhaps be the last time you'll laugh together."

So saying, and with infinite precautions, he descended the rough, rickety stairs, groping his way as best he could in the darkness, for Madame Loupias only lighted the gas on Sundays, mindful of the fact that it cost threepence the cubic yard. Father Tantaine did not at once gain the street. Glancing through the glass door of the landlady's room, he perceived her preparing a stew at her stove, and, accordingly, with a timid knock and a low bow he went in. His abject attitude was that of a man accustomed by poverty to the worst of all receptions. "I come to pay you my fortnight's rent, madame," he said, at the same time depositing eleven francs on a side table. Then while Loupias, who could write after a fashion, was scrawling a receipt, he began to talk of his affairs, relating that he had unexpectedly come into possession of a small fortune which would bring him ease and comfort during his declining years. To support these assertions the old fellow, with the pride born of extreme poverty, which fears misbelief, drew forth his pocket-book and exhibited several bank-notes. The sight had such a strong effect on the landlord and landlady, that when the worthy old fellow retired Loupias insisted on lighting him to the door, holding the lamp in one hand, and his cap in the other.

Father Tantaine, however, seemed quite indifferent to these attentions, and was evidently absorbed in thought. Reaching the street he looked round him, glancing at the neighbouring shops, and suddenly making up his mind, walked straight towards a large grocery at the corner of the Rue du Petit Pont and the Rue de la Bûcherie. The owner of this establishment was singularly popular in the neighbourhood, thanks to a certain wine he sold—a wine prepared for him by a chemist at Bercy, and retailed at the wonderfully low price of fourpence halfpenny the quart. He was a red-haired red-whiskered man, this grocer, short and fat, and exceedingly irritable and pompous. He was, moreover, a widower, and a sergeant in the National Guard, and answered to the sweet grocer-like name of Melusin. In these poor districts at winter time, five o'clock is the shopkeeper's busiest hour. The workmen are then returning from their daily toil, and the housewives must hasten their preparations for supper. Monsieur Melusin was therefore so busy among his customers, watching his assistants and lending them a helping hand every now and then, taking down orders and giving change, that he did not even notice Father Tantaine, as the latter entered the shop, and even had he done so, he would certainly not have troubled himself for such a beggarly looking individual. But on leaving the Hôtel du Pérou, the old man had divested himself of his humble, benevolent bearing, and stepping at once to the least crowded corner of the shop, he called, in a most imperative tone, "Monsieur Melusin!"

The grocer, much surprised, ran to obey the summons. "Why, the man knows me!" he said to himself, not reflecting that his name shone in gilt letters, six inches high, above the doorway. Father Tantaine gave him no time to speak. "I believe," said he, with an air of authority, "that a young woman came here about an hour ago to change a bank-note for five hundred francs?"

"Certainly, sir, certainly she did," answered Melusin; "but how did you know it?" He paused abruptly, clapped his hand to his forehead, and resumed, "I have it!—a robbery has been committed, and you are on the track of the thief. And I must acknowledge that I suspected something was wrong, when this girl, who certainly looked very poor, came here to change the note. I watched her carefully, and I saw that her hand trembled."

"Excuse me," interrupted Father Tantaine, "I have not said one word to you of any theft. I merely wish to ask you if you would know this girl again?"

"As well as I should know myself, sir. A superb creature she was, I assure you, with hair such as one rarely sees. I have some reason to believe that she lives in a low lodging place in the Rue de la Huchette."

The Parisian shopkeeper is by no means favourably disposed towards those agents of police who report him for any non-observance of regulations, and yet, when it is a question of rendering a service to society by facilitating a criminal investigation, he usually shews himself willing enough, and to promote an important capture will even become heroic—neglecting maybe his best customers, and allowing them to go off in a huff, when they find themselves unattended to. This was what happened in the present case. "Pray sir," resumed Melusin, "shall I send one of my boys to the nearest police station for you?"

"By no means," answered Father Tantaine; "and I shall be infinitely obliged to you if you will keep my inquiries secret, until you hear from me again."

"Ah! yes, I understand; an indiscretion just now would alarm them, and put them on their guard."

"Precisely. Only I wish you to allow me to take the number of the note if you have preserved it, and I also wish you to enter this number on your books with to-day's date and a note of the circumstances. If possible, I wish to—"

"Yes, yes, I understand," interrupted the grocer, "you may wish to produce my books in court. That is often done—a merchant's books are unimpeachable testimony. You see, sir, I am quite familiar with such matters. Excuse me for a moment; I will return to you instantly."

Everything was done precisely as Father Tantaine had asked, and with the greatest possible rapidity; and finally Melusin made him a low bow and wished him a courteous "Good evening." He even escorted him to the door, and tarried on the threshold watching his unknown visitor as he strode away. He was supremely happy, the worthy grocer, happy in the consciousness that he had rendered an important service to a high official of the Préfecture de Police who had chosen to disguise himself as a beggar.

But what did Father Tantaine care for Melusin's opinion? Having reached the Place du Petit Pont—he looked eagerly round him as if in search of some one. Twice he made the circuit of the Place, peering into all the secluded corners, when suddenly he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction; he had perceived the person he was hunting for. The latter was a knavish-looking young fellow of twenty or thereabouts, but who appeared at the most fifteen or sixteen years old, being extremely slight of build. He had no chest, and very little shoulders, and his long ungainly legs almost conveyed the impression that he was mounted on a pair of stilts. He was standing at the corner of the bridge known as the Petit Pont, unblushingly asking alms of the passers-by, and squinting every now and

then to the right and left to make sure that no policemen were in view. At the first glance he could be recognised as one of those fungi of our corrupt civilisation, an overgrown "*gamin de Paris*," an ex-urchin of the gutter, who had begun "life" at eight years old drinking potato spirit, and smoking cigar stumps, picked up outside the cafés. His mud-coloured hair was already scanty, and his complexion of a sickly hue; cynical "cheek" glittered in his eyes, and an ironical sneer curved his hideous, long, thin lips. He wore a dirty blouse, and having turned up the right sleeve, exhibited a twisted, half-withered arm, seemingly deformed and horrible enough to excite the compassion of the passers-by. At the same time he chanted a monotonous refrain in which one could distinguish the words, "Poor mechanic—an old mother to take care of—unable to work—injured by machinery."

Father Tantaine walked straight towards this lad, and with a cuff on the head sent his cap flying. The young beggar turned at once, evidently enraged, but on recognising his aggressor, he seemed much abashed and dolefully murmured, "Caught!" At the same time, swiftly contracting the muscles of his right shoulder, he untwisted his apparently deformed arm, which proved as sound and healthy as the other one, rolled down his sleeve, picked up his cap, and setting it on his head, awaited further orders.

"So that's how you discharge the duties you are intrusted with," said Father Tantaine, severely.

"What duties? They've been discharged long ago."

"That's no excuse! Thanks to my recommendation, Monsieur Mas-carot procured a good position for you, didn't he? I have often put you in the way of earning money, and you really want for nothing. You promised you would beg no more."

"Forgive me, sir, I meant to keep my promise; but how could I kill time while I was waiting. I must be doing something, sir. It's not my nature to be idle, and at all events, I've earned seven sous."

"Toto-Chupin," said the old clerk, solemnly, "you will certainly come to a bad end; I see this very clearly, and warn you in due season. But let us come to the point. What have you seen?"

They had left the corner of the bridge, and were walking slowly along the deserted quay, past the old buildings of the Hôtel Dieu. "Well, sir," replied the young scapegrace, "I have seen just what you told me I should see. At four o'clock a carriage drove into the Place, and stood waiting in front of the hairdressers. Upon my word, I thought it had taken root there! My eyes though, what a turn-out it was! As handsome a brougham as ever I've seen, with a high stepper between the shafts and a coachman in pigskins, and with such a collar! on the box."

"Go on; was there no one in the carriage?"

"Of course there was. I knew him too, by the description you gave of him. Dressed in fine style. Such a hat, such a brim! Light pants cut like umbrella cases, and a coat—a coat, well as short as nothing; but all in the latest fashion, you understand. To make quite sure that I was right, and as it was growing dark, I went close up and took a good squint at him. He had got out, you understand, and was strutting up and down the foot-way. I noticed the cigar in his mouth wasn't lighted, so up I go, strike a match and say, 'Have a light, prince?' He gave me a ten sou bit, and I had another good look at him. There was no mistaking him. Knock-kneed, shrivelled, short and ugly—a face I should like to pummel, with a binnacle in one eye—a monkey, to cut it short."

When Toto-Chupin began a narrative, it was best to let him have his say. It was by far the shortest way of obtaining the information one desired. At last, however, Father Tantaine became impatient. "Well, well! what happened?" he asked crossly.

"Not, much, to be sure. The swell looked hardly pleased at having to wait. Poor dear! He walked up and down, twirling that cane of his, and staring all the women in the face. My nerves could hardly stand it. The conceited whipper-snapper! I wanted to kick him; and if ever you took a fancy to let him have a hiding, remember, Father Tantaine, I'm your man. I don't believe he's half as strong as I am."

"Go on, Chupin; go on."

"Very good. Well, then, he, or rather I should say we, had been waiting there fully half an hour, when suddenly a woman whisked round the corner, and came right up to my dandy. Whew! wasn't she a beauty! Never in your life did you see such eyes: I stood just dazzled. But she was in rags. They spoke to each other in a whisper, and—"

"And you did not hear?"

"What do you take me for, sir? The beauty said: 'You understand then—to-morrow.' The dandy answered: 'You promise positively?' And then she said: 'Yes, on my word, at noon.' Thereupon they parted. She went back to the Rue de la Huchette, and the other jumped into his carriage. The coachman whipped up his horses, and was off in two shakes. Now, give me my five francs."

This demand seemed in no wise to astonish the old man. He at once presented the young scamp with a silver crown, saying, at the same time: "When I promise I pay; but remember my prediction, Chupin, you will end badly. And now good night, my lad; our paths lie in different directions."

Father Tantaine tarried, however, on the Place until Toto had disappeared in the direction of the Jardin des Plantes, and it was only when the young rascal was out of sight that he turned round and proceeded to cross the bridge. He walked very fast, and seemed highly satisfied with everything he had accomplished. "I have not lost my day," he muttered. "I have foreseen everything, even what's improbable. Flavia will be pleased."

II.

THE establishment of Father Tantaine's powerful friend was situated in the Rue Montorgueil, within a stone's throw of the Passage de la Reine de Hongrie. B. Mascarot kept an employment office, for employés and servants of either sex. Manuscript bills—on two large boards, nailed on each side of the door of the house—acquainted passers-by with the applications and offers of the day, and above them appeared the announcement, in gilt letters, that the establishment, founded in 1844, was still in the hands of the original proprietor. It was unquestionably to this long continuance, in a proverbially unremunerative profession, that Mascarot owed his reputation, and the high esteem in which he was held, not merely in the neighbourhood, but throughout Paris. It was asserted that no one had ever had any reason to complain of the servants he provided, and in their turn the servants themselves declared that he sent them to the best of places, where they had every comfort and privilege. Clerks and office hands, also,

knew that, thanks to his extensive connection and business relations, he had always a good berth for any one who would take the trouble to please.

But Mascarot had still further claims on public esteem. In 1845 he first conceived the idea of organising a society known as "*Les Gens de Maison*," the object of which was to provide shelter for servants out of place. Defrauded of his idea and programme, he consoled himself by taking a partner named Beaumarchef, and by accommodating, in the same house as his office, all the servants out of place he took an interest in, liberally providing them with board and lodging on credit. If these various enterprises had been of use to the world, they had also benefited Mascarot, who was said to be part owner of the house he lived in—at the door of which, by the way, we meet at noon, on the appointed day, our young friend, Paul Violaine.

He had utilised his old neighbour's five hundred francs, and was dressed with very creditable taste. In fact, he was so handsome in his new clothes, that the women who passed by half turned to look after him; but he gave them little attention. He had been full of anxious thought since the previous evening, and was beginning to doubt the power of this unknown, mysterious personage, who, according to Father Tantaine, could make the fortune of anyone he chose. "An employment office!" he muttered contemptuously. "Surely, at the most he will offer me some situation at a hundred francs per month!"

He was naturally somewhat disturbed at thought of the impending interview, and before entering the house studied its external appearance with no small degree of interest. It was much like the others round about. The employment office, and the entrance to the servants' lodging place were at the back of a courtyard, and within the *porte cochère* stood a pert looking young chestnut vender, with his furnace and various utensils.

"Come," said Paul to himself, "I musn't remain here like this;" and summoning all his resolution he crossed the court, climbed the stairs which faced him, and reaching the first floor, paused in front of a door, on which the word "*Oifice*" was inscribed. He gave a loud knock, to which a gruff voice immediately answered: "Come in!" The door was not shut, but simply held in place by a sliding weight at the end of a rope, so Paul at once pushed it open.

The room he entered was precisely like all other employment offices in Paris. On three sides round ran a low oak bench, blackened and polished by time and use, while at the further end was a kind of compartment, shut in by a grating and a curtain of green serge, so as to resemble a Confessional Box, by which name, indeed, the *habitues* of the place usually knew it. On a placard between the two windows, moreover, there ran, in large letters, the inscription: "Register fees payable in advance."

At a square table, in one corner of this apartment, sat an individual, who, whilst jotting down entries in a quarto volume, carried on a conversation with a woman standing in front of him.

"Monsieur Mascarot?" asked Paul, timidly.

"What do you want of him?" rejoined the writer, without rising from his seat or even looking up. "Do you wish a situation? Will you register your name? We have at this moment applications for three book-keepers, a cashier, a corresponding clerk, and six other good positions. Are your references satisfactory?"

These words were spoken with such mechanical rapidity that one might have supposed them learned by heart. "I beg your pardon," interrupted

Paul. "I should like to speak to M. Mascarot himself. I am sent here by one of his friends."

This simple statement seemed to impress the indifferent gentleman, who, becoming almost courteous, answered : "My partner is engaged for the moment, but he will soon be at leisure : kindly take a chair."

Paul saw no chair, but seated himself on the bench, and, having nothing better to do, examined the man before him. Tall and athletic, radiant with health and good living, Mascarot's partner wore his hair very short, and under a hooked nose, with wide-spread nostrils, sported a fierce moustache, waxed to a wonderful degree, and stiffened, moreover, at either end into a sharp point. Complexion, carriage, hair, and moustache, all revealed that he had once been a soldier. In fact, he had served, so he said, in a cavalry regiment, where he had gained the nickname he was generally known by—Beaumarchef—his real patronymic being Durand. He was now some forty-five years of age, but this did not prevent him from enjoying the reputation of still being a handsome man.

The woman he was talking with was, judging from appearances, either a cook or a market woman. Of buxom build, and with a rubicond nose, she spoke with the Teutonic accent of Alsace, and punctuated each phrase with repeated pinches of snuff.

"Come," said Beaumarchef at last, "do you really wish for a situation?"

"Yes. I do mean it, and no mistake."

"But you said the same thing the last time you were here, six months ago. We found a good place for you, and being engaged, three days afterwards you threw down your apron, and went off."

"Ay, but then I was in a position to do as I liked."

"And now?"

"And now it's different. I have nearly come to the end of my savings."

Beaumarchef laid down his pen, and looked at the stout woman with a shrewd expression, as if he were seeking for confirmation of some previously conceived suspicion. "You have been guilty of some great folly!" he slowly said.

She turned away her head, and without answering him directly, began to complain of the hardness of the times, of the meanness of employers, and of the rapacity of young married ladies, who did not allow their cooks to do the marketing, and thus secure their little perquisites, but preferred to make all their purchases themselves. Beaumarchef nodded affirmatively, precisely as he had done half an hour previously, when a lady had complained to him most bitterly about her servants. His intermediate position entailed on him this kind of diplomacy.

Meanwhile the stout woman had finished grumbling, and, producing a well-filled purse, drew from it the amount of her fee, laid it on the table, and said : "Please, good Mr. Beaumarchef, register my name, Caroline Schimmel, and try and find me a good place. But it must only be in the kitchen, you understand. I must do the marketing myself, and I won't have the mistress dogging at my heels."

"Very well ; we will see what we can do."

"Ah ! if you would only find me a rich widower, that would suit me, or a young woman with a very old husband. However, please look out for something, and I will call again to-morrow." Thereupon, taking a larger pinch of snuff than any previous one, she withdrew.

Paul, who had listened, was altogether confounded and humiliated. What could Father Taintaine have meant in introducing him to such com-

pany? No good could certainly befall him in such an office, and really it was not worth his while to wait. He was seeking some decent and plausible pretext for withdrawal, when the door at the end of the room was thrown open, and two men appeared, finishing their conversation before separating. One of them, young and well dressed, had that air and carriage—a certain dash of free and easy ways—which some people mistake for good breeding. The rosettes of several foreign orders decorated his button-hole. The other person, who was an old man, looking like lawyer, wore a heavy quilted dressing-gown of brown merino, fur shoes, and a velvet cap, embroidered, no doubt, by well loved hands. His thick beard was carefully trimmed, a white choker spanned his neck, and a certain weakness of vision compelled him to wear blue spectacles.

"Then, my dear sir," said the young man, "I may venture to hope, may I not? Do not forget how pressing the situation is."

"I have told you, Monsieur le Marquis," answered the man with the white cravat, "that if I were the only master the answer would certainly be yes; but then I am not alone, and must consult my partners."

"Then, my dear sir," rejoined the marquis, "I rely on you."

Paul rose, reconciled to the house by the sight of this young nobleman. The other, thought he, who looks like a lawyer, is no doubt Mascarot himself.

The marquis had withdrawn, and Paul was about to present himself, when Beaumarchef approached the man of legal mien and said, respectfully:

"Whom do you think I have just seen, sir?"

"Who, eh?—speak," rejoined the other impatiently.

"Why, Caroline Schimmel. You know—"

"What! the Duchess de Champdoce's former servant?"

"Precisely."

M. Mascarot uttered a joyful exclamation. "That is a positive blessing!" he cried. "Where is she living now?"

This question, natural as it was, overwhelmed Beaumarchef with consternation. He who never failed—since it was one of the rules of the house—to note the addresses of all whose names figured in his books, had absolutely forgotten to ask Caroline for her's.

The acknowledgment of this omission so enraged M. Mascarot that he quite forgot himself, and uttered an oath that would have shocked even a London cabman. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "how can a man be such a confounded fool? Here is a woman who for five months we have been chasing from pillar to post—whom I have been searching for throughout the length and breadth of Paris! You know this as well as I do myself; and yet, when the merest accident brings her here, you let her slip through your fingers and disappear again."

"She will come back, sir; she said so. She will not care to throw away the money she paid for her inscription fee."

"She! what does she care for ten sous or ten francs? She will come back when she takes the notion, unless— But no; a woman who drinks, and who is half crazy the best of times—"

But Beaumarchef, inspired by a sudden hope, had hurriedly taken up his hat. "She has only this very moment gone," he exclaimed; "she can't be far, and no doubt I shall be able to overtake her."

He was starting off when M. Mascarot detained him. "You are not the keenest of bloodhounds, my dear fellow. Take Toto-Chapin with you; he is sharp enough, and is outside now with his chestnuts. And if you over-

take the woman, don't speak to her, but let Toto follow her unseen, without losing sight of her. I want to know hour by hour what she does. Nothing is too trifling, you understand, to be reported to me."

Beaumarchef disappeared, and Mascarot continued to vent his ill humour. "Such a fool!" he muttered. "Ah! why can't a man only do everything for himself. Here I have been wearying myself for months seeking the key to a riddle. That woman knows the truth, I'm sure of it, and yet that idiot Beaumar must let her escape!"

By this time Paul realised that his presence had been unnoticed. Annoyed by his involuntary indiscretion he coughed, so as to attract attention; and at once Mascarot turned round with a threatening look on his face. "Pray, excuse me," said Paul.

But the agent had already regained his benignant expression. "Ah!" said he, courteously, "you are Paul Violaine, I believe!"

The young man bowed. "Excuse me for a moment," resumed Mascarot; "I will return shortly." So saying he disappeared through the door at the end of the room, and Paul had hardly time to collect himself, before he heard his name called. "Come this way—I have no secrets for you!"

Compared to the outer room, Mascarot's private office was a most luxurious and superb apartment—for it was quite apparent that the windows were occasionally washed, that the wall paper had been recently renewed, whilst, in addition, there was a carpet on the floor. It was seldom, however, that clients, even those of the highest social standing, were admitted into this sanctum. Current business was usually transacted round Beaumarchef's table in the outer room, while more private affairs were talked over in the twilight of the "confessional box."

Ignorant of the customs of the place, Paul could by no means appreciate the extraordinary distinction with which he was received. When he entered, Mascarot, seated in a comfortable arm-chair, was warming himself before a bright wood fire, his elbow resting on his writing-table. Such a table! A world in itself—its aspect plainly indicating that its owner was a man of a thousand different occupations. Books, portfolios, and papers in files rose mountain high, while a larger space was occupied by innumerable small squares of cardboard, on each of which figured a name in large letters, with memoranda in a smaller and almost illegible hand underneath. With a paternal gesture Mascarot pointed to a chair opposite to himself, and in a bland, encouraging voice exclaimed: "Now let us talk."

It was clear that B. Mascarot's patriarchal appearance was altogether natural. The most skilful actor could not have feigned his honest and benevolent expression, the mirror undoubtedly of a pure, untroubled conscience. At sight of him well might a young man exclaim: "I should like to trust my future to his care."

Paul was greatly impressed by this air of honesty and rectitude, experiencing the attraction which is always exercised by strong natures over weak ones. He now fully understood Father Tantine's enthusiasm, and thanked heaven he had not gone off abruptly as he had thought of doing a few minutes before.

"I am told," began Mascarot, "that your resources are insufficient for your support, or, rather, that you are totally without any, and that you are anxious to obtain a position which will make you independent. That, at least, is what I hear from my unlucky friend Tantine."

"He has been, sir, a faithful interpreter of my wishes."

"Very well. Only before thinking of the future and entering into a dis-

cussion in regard to the present, we will, if you have no objections, recapitulate the past." Paul started, as Mascarot must have noticed, for he added quickly : " You will excuse the possible indiscretion of this programme, but it is absolutely essential that I should understand exactly what responsibility I am about to assume. Taine says that you are a most charming young man—honest, sensible, and well brought up. Now that I see you, I am sure that he is correct in his estimate. But of course I can only deal with certainties, and you will understand that I must be certain of you before I can answer for you to third parties."

" Exactly, sir," interrupted Paul, " and I am ready to answer any questions, for I have nothing to conceal."

A faint smile, unnoticed by the young man, curved Mascarot's lips, and with a gesture to which all who knew him were accustomed, he adjusted his spectacles. " Thanks," he said. " As to concealing anything from me —well, that is not so easy, perhaps, as you think."

He took from his table several of the cardboard squares we have mentioned, and shuffling them through his fingers as if they were a pack of cards, resumed : " You are named Marie-Paul Violaine?" Paul bowed. " You were born at Poitiers, in the Rue des Vignes, on the 5th of January, 1843. You are consequently in your twenty-fourth year, I believe?"

" Yes, sir."

" You are a natural child?"

The second question had surprised Paul ; this last one fairly stupefied him. " It is true, sir," he answered, without seeking to conceal his astonishment. " But I really had no idea that Monsieur Taine was so well informed. I suppose the partition which separated our rooms was even flimsier than I imagined."

Mascarot took no notice of this neat little epigram, but continued to shuffle his bits of cardboard and examine them. If Paul had been nearer, he would have seen his own initials, P. V., inscribed in the corner of each. " Your mother," continued Mascarot, " kept a little thread and needle shop during the last fifteen years of her life?"

" Precisely."

" But what is such an enterprise worth in a place like Poitiers? Not much, to be sure. Fortunately, she received for your support and education an annual allowance of one thousand francs."

This time Paul fairly started. He was sure that Taine had not learned this secret at the Hotel du Pérou. " Good heavens!" he stammered, " who can have acquainted you, sir, with a secret I have never spoken of since I reached Paris, and which even Rose is quite ignorant of?"

Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. " You may easily understand," he answered, " that a man in my position is obliged to obtain all possible information. If I did not take considerable pains in doing so, I should hourly be the victim of deception, and, in my turn, find myself unwillingly deceiving others."

An hour had not elapsed since Paul had crossed the threshold of the establishment, but he had already learned how much of M. Mascarot's information was obtained ; he remembered the directions given to Beaumar-chef concerning Caroline Schimmel.

" Although I am inquisitive," continued Mascarot, " I am also discreet. So do not fear to answer frankly. How did this annuity reach your mother?"

" Through a notary in Paris."

"Ah! Do you know this notary's name?"

"Not in the least," answered Paul, who by this time was growing uneasy and restless. A thousand vague apprehensions were aroused in his mind, although he could not see either the utility or the bearing of any of these questions. The explanation that had been offered was not in any degree satisfactory, for it was hardly possible that all these facts could have been gathered together in one morning. Still, nothing in Mascarot's demeanour justified Paul's misgivings, for the agent seemed to ask all these questions in a mechanical, matter-of-course sort of way, as if they had no interest for him save as a business affair.

It was after a long pause that Mascarot spoke again: "I am inclined to believe," he said, "that it was your father who sent this money."

"No, sir, you are mistaken."

"Why are you so certain?"

"Simply because my mother swore to me, and she was an absolute saint, that my father died before my birth. Poor mother! I loved her and respected her too much to question her on these points. One day, however, impelled by a miserable curiosity, I did venture to ask her the name of our protector. She burst into tears, and I realized the cruelty and meanness of my conduct. That name I never learned, but I know that it was not my father."

Mascarot pretended not to perceive his young client's emotion. "Was not this pension continued after your mother's death?" he asked.

"No, sir; it ceased, in fact, when I came of age. My mother warned me that this would be the case; it seems to me as if it were only yesterday when she spoke to me about it. It was one evening, and, as it was my birthday, she had prepared a better supper than usual. 'Paul,' she said, 'when you were born, a generous friend promised to assist me in bringing you up. He has kept his word. You are twenty-one, and you have nothing more to hope from him. You are a man now, my son, and I have only you to rely upon; work, be honest, and remember that your birth imposes on you double obligations.'

Paul paused, overcome with emotion. "Ten months later," he resumed, after a moment's silence, "my mother died suddenly—so suddenly that she had no time for a last word of love or counsel. I was left alone in the world, without friend or relative. Yes, I am quite alone. Were I to die to-morrow, there would not be a human being to follow me to my grave. I might disappear from the face of the earth—no one would search for me, for no one knows of my existence or cares whether I live or die."

Mascarot looked very sad. "Not quite so bad as that, young man, not quite so bad, I trust. You have one friend—"

Here Mascarot rose, as if he wished to conceal the emotion he could not control, and walked up and down the room, pulling at his velvet cap, as he always did when occupied in serious meditations. After a few moments' exercise of this kind he halted abruptly in front of his young client, and, folding his arms, exclaimed: "You have heard me, my young friend, and I will not carry any further a series of questions which it can only pain you to answer."

"I thought," answered Paul, diplomatically, "that it was only in my interest that you questioned me."

"You are right. I wished to measure you, to judge of your veracity, as well as of your intelligence. Why? you ask. Ah! I cannot tell you that just now; but you will know at some future time. For the present, rest

assured that I am perfectly well aware of everything that concerns you. You ask how? That again I cannot tell you. Put it down to chance. Chance, you know, has a great deal to answer for."

Up to this moment Paul had been simply puzzled. But these ambiguous words caused him such absolute fright that his face wore a ghastly look.

"Are you alarmed?" asked Mascarot, straightening his spectacles, through which he saw wonderfully well.

"Frankly, sir," stammered Paul, "I am somewhat disturbed."

"Why? I ask you what a man in your position can possibly have to fear. You need not rack your brain any longer; you will soon find out what you wish to know, and you had best, therefore, quietly give yourself up to me, for I have no desire but to be of service to you."

He said this in the sweetest and most reassuring manner, and then reseating himself in his arm-chair, added: "Now let us speak of yourself. Thanks to the devotion of your mother, who was, as you justly say, a good and holy woman, you were, at the price of numberless privations, enabled to study at the college of Poitiers, like any lad of family and position might have done. At eighteen you passed the 'bachelor's' examination successfully. Then for a year you idled under the pretence of waiting for an inspiration from heaven as to your future career, and finally, as nothing turned up, you entered a lawyer's office as clerk—am I not right?"

"Precisely—"

"But your mother's dearest dream was to see you established near at hand, at Loudon or at Civray. Perhaps she hoped for further aid from the friend who had already done so much for you."

"I always thought so," said Paul.

"Unfortunately for her hopes, however," continued Mascarot, "you had no leaning towards wrists and red tape—"

Here Paul smiled, and in doing so seemingly offended Mascarot, for the latter added severely: "I said 'unfortunately.' And I think you have suffered enough by this time to be of my opinion. Instead of engrossing at your desk, you did what? You trifled away your time dabbling in music; you composed songs, and even an opera, I believe; and were not far from considering yourself a genius of the first water."

Paul, who had so far submitted to everything without rebellion, was sorely touched by this sarcasm, and tried to protest, but in vain.

"In short," continued Mascarot, "one fine morning you abandoned the office, and declared to your mother that, while waiting until your fame as a composer was established, you meant to give lessons on the piano. But you could not obtain any pupils, and you were a simpleton to think you could. Look at yourself in a mirror and tell me frankly if you think you are of an age or appearance that would make it wise to intrust young ladies to your charge—"

Here Mascarot stopped, as if he feared to trust his memory, and proceeded to consult his notes. "Let us continue," he said at last. "Your departure from Poitiers was your crowning folly. The very day after your mother's death, you gathered together all you possessed—some three thousand francs or so—and took a railway ticket for Paris."

"At that time, sir, I hoped —"

"What? To arrive at Fortune by the road to Glory? Madman! Why, each year a thousand poor devils, who have been intoxicated by the praise of their native villages, reach Paris intoxicated by similar hopes. Do you know what becomes of them? At the end of ten years, ten at the most have

made their way, five hundred have died of hunger and disappointment—and the rest are enrolled in the vast army of criminals and reprobates." Paul had said all this to himself over and over again, and admitting its truth could urge nothing in reply. "But," continucl Mascarot, "you did not come alone. At Poitiers you had fallen in love with a young work girl, named Rose Pigoreau, and you thought it wise to run away with her—"

"Ah ! sir, if you would only allow me to explain—"

"It would be quite useless, I assure you. The result speaks for itself ! In six months your three thousand francs were exhausted. Then came distress and hunger ; and at last, stranded at the Hôtel du Pérou, you were thinking of suicide, when you were saved by old Tantaine."

These cruel truths were hard to bear, and Paul half felt inclined to show his anger ; but then, good-bye to the protection of the powerful agent, and so, on second thoughts, he controlled himself. "I admit it, sir," he said, somewhat bitterly. "I was a fool, and half crazy, but misfortune has taught me wisdom. I am here, and this fact should convince you that I have renounced all my wills o' the wisp."

"Then you also renounce Rose Pigoreau ?"

At this cutting question Paul turned pale with anger. "I love Rose," he observed, curtly ; "I think I told you so. She has faith in me, and courageously shares my ill fortune. I am sure of her affection. Some day, sir, Rose will be my wife."

Mascarot raised his velvet cap, and, without the slightest shade of irony, in fact, most seriously, bowed low, saying as he did so : "I beg ten thousand pardons." However, it was plainly not his intention to insist on this point. "You wish employment," he resumed, "and at once. What is your specialty ? You have none, no doubt. Like all college educated young fellows, you can do a little of everything, and nothing thoroughly. If I had a son, and an income of millions, he should still learn a trade."

Paul bit his lips, recognizing only too well the justice of B. Mascarot's remarks. Had he not, only the evening before, envied the lot of those who earned their bread by the sweat of their brows ?

"And yet," continued Mascarot, "I must come to your assistance. You are my friend, and I don't leave friends in the lurch. Come, what should you say to a situation with a salary of twelve thousand francs a year ?"

This sum was so much in excess of Paul's most sanguine hopes that he fancied the agent was poking fun at him. "It is not very generous on your part, sir, to laugh at me," said he.

Mascarot was not in jest, however ; and yet it required a full half hour to convince his young client that he was entirely in earnest. Perhaps, after all, this result would not have been attained had he not suddenly thought of saying : "You wish for proofs. Very well—shall I advance you your first month's salary ?" with which words he proffered a thousand franc note, drawn from his strong box.

Paul pushed the note aside, but he realised the full force of this powerful argument, and asked if he were capable of fulfilling the duties of so highly remunerated an office.

"Should I make the proposal," answered Mascarot, "were I not certain of your abilities ? Just now I am terribly hurried, or I would explain to you the whole matter ; as it is, I must defer doing so until to-morrow. So be here at the same time as you came to-day."

Bewildered as Paul was, he understood that it would be an intrusion on his part to remain any longer, so he rose to take his leave.

"One moment," exclaimed Mascarot. "You cannot, of course, remain any longer at the Hotel du Pérou. Find yourself a decent room in this neighbourhood, and let me know your new address. Now, good-bye until to-morrow, take care of yourself, and learn to bear prosperity."

For a minute Mascarot stood at his office door listening attentively to Paul's retreating steps. Heavy indeed was the young man's footfall—in fact, as Mascarot divined he was staggering beneath the weight of his conflicting feelings. As soon as the agent was sure that he had left the house, he hurried to a glass door at the rear of his private room, opened it and called: "Here! Hortebize! Doctor! You can come now. He has gone."

A well dressed man immediately made his appearance, and hastily drew a chair to the fire. "Brou! my feet are blocks of ice!" he exclaimed. "If any one cut them off, I doubt if I should know it. Your bed-room, Baptstin, is a refrigerator. Another time, please let me have a fire."

But Mascarot was not to be diverted from his train of thought. "Did you hear?" he asked.

"I heard everything and saw everything as well as you did."

"Then what do you think of this youth?"

"I think that Tantaine is a man of sense, and that in your hands this handsome fellow will be like wax."

III.

DR. HORTEBIZE, the intimate of "the agency," who thus familiarly called Mascarot by his Christian name of Baptstin, was fully fifty-six years of age; but he only admitted forty-nine, and was wise in doing so, for he carried their weight so lightly that people even supposed him younger still. He bore himself with a jaunty air, his thick sensual lips were still ruddy, his hair black, and his eyes full of fire. A man of the world, received in the best society, elegant in his manners, keen in his wit, he concealed under a certain light sarcasm of speech the most monstrous cynicism—in fact, if he had but few faults, he could count several appalling vices. He was much liked and much courted. His epicurean manner did not prevent him, it was said, from being in reality a true savant and distinguished physician. Still he was far from being a hard worker, and practised as little as possible. Some few years previously, with the view, so he declared, of getting rid of his patients who pestered him, he had actually espoused homeopathist doctrines, and had started a medical journal called the *Globule*, which came to an end after the fifth number. His conversion made every one laugh, he, however, laughing the loudest, and this, of course, proved the sincerity of the philosophy he professed. However, Dr. Hortebize never wished, nor was able, to take anything seriously, and Mascarot, well as he knew his friend, seemed annoyed and wounded by his jesting tone.

"If I wrote to you to come here this morning," he said, reproachfully, "if I asked you to conceal yourself in that room—"

"Where I froze!" interrupted Hortebize.

"It was," continued Mascarot, "because I wished for your advice. We have started on a terrible enterprise, Hortebize; an enterprise full of peril to you as well as to myself."

"Pshaw! As you very well know, I have blind confidence in you.

Whatever you do is well done. You are not the man to venture on such a game without a fair supply of trumps."

"That's true; but I may lose, and then—"

The doctor interrupted his friend by gaily shaking a large gold locket which hung from his watch chain. This gesture seemed peculiarly disagreeable to Mascarot.

"Why do you show me that gew-gaw?" he asked, angrily. "I have known it for the last five-and-twenty years! Do you wish to tell me that it contains poison for personal use in case of misfortune? All right, the precaution is praiseworthy; but it would be wiser to make it unnecessary by giving me your attention and advice at an earlier stage of the game."

The smiling physician threw himself back in his chair with a resigned expression. "If you desire a consultation," he said, "you had better have sent for our honourable friend Catenac; he knows something of business, as he is an advocate."

This name of Catenac so irritated Mascarot that, calmest and most gentle of men as he usually was, he tore off his velvet cap and tossed it in a rage on to his writing table. "Do you say that seriously?" he asked in an angry voice.

"Why not?"

Mascarot took off his spectacles, as if without them he could more easily read the doctor's innermost thoughts. "Because," he said, slowly, "because you, as well as I, distrust Catenac. How long is it since you saw him? Certainly more than three months."

"Very true; and I admit that he conducts himself singularly enough towards his old partners and comrades."

Mascarot smiled in a way that would probably have alarmed the unfortunate Catenac, had he been present. "You will admit, then, that his conduct is utterly without excuse, for we have made his fortune. He is rich—very rich—although he pretends the contrary."

"Do you really think so?"

"If he were here, I would make him confess that he is worth over a million."

"A million!" repeated the physician, with a sparkle in his eyes.

"Yes, at the very least. You and I, Hortebize, have gratified all our fancies, let gold slip through our fingers like grains of sand, while he, our friend, has hoarded up his gains."

"What would you have? He has neither tastes, nor passions, nor even a digestion. Poor Catenac!"

"He! He has every vice, the hypocrite! While we amused ourselves, he lent money at heavy interest, twenty and five-and-twenty per cent, and—stay—what is your annual outlay?"

"My annual outlay? Your question embarrasses me. Forty thousand francs, perhaps."

"More, much more; but no matter. Calculate how much that would amount to during the twenty years we have been connected together."

The doctor was no lover of arithmetic; he made several futile attempts to arrive at the total, and finally gave up the task in despair.

"Come," said Mascarot; "call it eight hundred thousand francs; add the same amount on my account, and you will see that we have spent between us more than a million and a half."

"Why, it's frightful!"

"To be sure, frightful. So you can easily see that Catenac, who has re-

ceived as much as ourselves, has grown wealthy. And this is the principal reason of my distrust—our interests are no longer the same. He comes here every month, but only to draw his third. He condescends to accept the profits of our enterprise, but avoids the risks. It is two years since he brought us any business. There is no reliance to be placed in him whatever. No matter what we propose to him, he declines to act. He sees risks and danger in everything."

"But he is incapable of betraying us."

Mascarot did not reply at once; he was reflecting. "I think," he answered, finally, "that Catenac is afraid of us. He knows that the fall of one of the three would necessarily bring the two others to grief. This is our only safeguard. But if he does not dare to betray us openly he is quite capable of working against us. Our partnership worries him. Do you know what he said to me the last time he was here? He said we ought to shut up shop and retire. Retire! Ah, well, how should we two live then? For, if he is rich we are poor. What are you worth, Hortebize?"

The doctor, the brilliant physician, who was believed to be a millionaire, had taken out his purse and was counting its contents. "I have precisely three hundred and twenty-seven francs," he answered with a laugh. "And how do you stand?"

Mascarot made a wry face. "I," he replied "am as bad off as you are;" and with a sigh he continued, half-speaking to himself—"Besides I have sacred obligations, whereas you have only yourself to think of."

For the first time since the beginning of the interview Dr. Hortebize looked worried. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "I depended on you for a thousand crowns, which I pressingly need."

The physician's uneasiness caused a quiet smile to flicker over Mascarot's face. "Be easy," he said, "I can accomodate you with that. There are still some six or eight thousand francs in the safe."

The doctor breathed more freely.

"But that is all," continued Mascarot. "It is the end of our common funds—of the money belonging to us collectively. And this, too, after twenty years labour, peril, and suspense."

"And there are not twenty years more before us."

"Precisely," returned Mascarot, "we are growing old. So all the more reason for making one grand stroke to assure our future. If I were to fall ill to-morrow, it would be all UP."

"That is quite true," said the doctor with a shudder.

"One thing is certain—that we must speedily make a grand *coup*. I have said this for years and years, and now it must be done. I have long been preparing a net which ought to bring us a rich haul. And now, perhaps, you understand why in this emergency I apply to you rather than to Catenac. Do you understand why I spent two hours this morning explaining to you the plan of a couple of operations I have in view?"

"If one of them only should succeed, our fortune is made."

"Precisely. Now the question to decide is, whether our chances of success are great enough to warrant our going on with these enterprises. Think it over, and give me an answer."

Dr. Hortebize, in spite of his frivolous manners was an acute observer, skilful and inventive moreover in devising expedients, and at the same time a safe counsellor in moments of emergency, for never, under any circumstances, however perilous, did he lose his smiling *sang froid*. B. Mas-

carot was aware of this when he insisted on having his opinion. Driven to the wall and compelled to choose, as one might say, between the contents of the medallion and the prolongation of his luxurious existence, he lost some of his gaiety, and seemed to reflect. Leaning back in his arm-chair, with his feet on the fender, he analyzed the various combinations which had been laid before him, as carefully as a general might have studied the plan of a battle on which the fate of an empire depended. His analysis was favourable to the projected enterprises ; for Mascarot, who was attentively watching him, at last saw a smile steal over his thick lips.

After a prolonged pause the doctor at last spoke. "We must make an attack," he said. "Do not let us deceive ourselves. Your projects are excessively dangerous, and a mistake would ruin us. At the same time, we may find ourselves in a most unpleasant position if we wait for an affair that is perfectly safe. Here we have twenty chances against us, but we have eighty in our favour. Under these circumstances, and, above all, as necessity knows no law, I can only say, go ahead!" He rose to his feet as he spoke these words, and offered his hand to his honourable friend, saying : "I am your man!"

This decision delighted Mascarot. He was in that state of mind, when no matter how strong and self-reliant a man may generally be, he is in momentary doubt of himself, and when the approbation of a competent friend is of immense value. It is the weight that turns the trembling scale. "You have weighed everything," insisted the agent ; "examined everything? You know that of these two matters, only one is ripe, that of the Marquis de Croisenois—"

"Yes, yes ; I know."

"As to the other, that of the Duc de Champdoce, I have still to gather together various elements, which are indispensable to insure success. The duke and the duchess have a secret, of this there is no doubt ; but what is this secret? Is it what I suspect? I would wager anything that I am right ; but more than suspicions are necessary—more than probabilities—we must have, of course, absolute certainties to depend upon."

"No matter," exclaimed the doctor, "I maintain what I have said."

He thought, perhaps, that there was an end to the matter for the time, but he was mistaken. "Now," continued Mascarot, "this brings us back to my previous question. What do you think of this youth, this Paul Violaine?"

Hortebize took several turns up and down the room, and finally stationed himself opposite his friend with his elbow on the chimney-piece. This was his favourite position when, in a salon, after being duly urged, he related one of those somewhat questionable anecdotes, his specialities—which are only acceptable on account of the witty manner in which they are related. "I think," he answered, "that this youth has many of the qualities we desire, and that it is doubtful if we could find a better person. Besides, he is a natural son, and knows nothing of his father, which leaves a door wide open for suppositions ; for every bastard has the right, if he chooses, to believe himself the son of a king. In the second place, he has neither family nor any known protectors, which assures us that, come what will, we shall have no account to render to any one. Besides he is poor. He has no great amount of sense, but is possessed of a certain brilliant varnish and of any amount of egregious vanity. Finally, he is a wonderfully handsome fellow, which, in itself, will smooth away many difficulties ; only—"

"Ah! there is an 'only,' then?"

The doctor repressed a smile. "More than one" he replied, "for there are three, at least. First, this young woman, this Rose Pigoreau, whose beauty has so enraptured our worthy friend Tantine, seems to me destined to become a great danger in the future."

Mascarot waved his hand significantly.

"Be easy," he said, "we will easily rid Paul of that young woman."

"Very good. But do not deceive yourself," insisted the doctor, in a more serious tone than was habitual to him. "The danger from her is not what you think, and what you seek to avoid. You are convinced that the young fellow loves the girl; you are mistaken. He would leave her to-morrow for the smallest gratification of his self-love."

"Perhaps so."

"She, however, thinks she hates her lover, but she deceives herself. She is simply wearied of poverty. Give her a month's repose and luxury, with gratified whims and good living, and you will see her turn from every one else for the sake of her Paul. Yes, you will see her pursue, harass and annoy him as women of her class, who have nothing to lose, pursue and annoy their old lovers—she will even follow him into Flavia's presence, and claim him back."

"She had best not!" said the gentle agent, in a threatening tone.

"Why, what could you do? How could you prevent her from speaking? She has known Paul since her infancy, she knew his mother—she was perhaps brought up by her, perhaps lived in the same street. Remember my words, and look out for danger in this direction."

"You are possibly right, and I will take my measures accordingly." It sufficed, in fact, for Mascarot only to know of a danger to guard against it.

"My second 'only,'" continued the physician, "is prompted by that mysterious protector whom the young man has spoken of. His father, he declares is dead; his mother swore it to him. Well, I accept that statement as a fact. But in that case, what has become of the unknown individual who paid the annuity to Madaine Violaine? An immediate sacrifice of however large an amount, I could understand; but such unflattering devotion puzzles me, I confess."

"You are right, quite right, my friend. These are the defects in our armour. But I am on the look-out, doctor, and will spare no efforts."

The physician was growing very weary of the discussion, but still he went bravely on: "My third objection," he said "is perhaps stronger still. It is necessary for us to utilise this young man at once, to-morrow, even, without having had time to teach him his part, without having prepared him. If, by chance, he should happen to be honest! Suppose he met your dazzling proposals with a decided 'no'?"

In his turn Mascarot now rose. "This supposition," said he, breezily, "has no weight at all."

"And why not, pray?"

"Because, doctor, when Tantine brought this youth to us he had studied him thoroughly. He is weaker than a woman, with more vanity than the penny-a-liner round the corner. He is, besides, ashamed of his poverty. No, no; in my hands he will be like wax, that I can mould into any form I choose. Whatever we intend him to be, he will become."

Hortebize did not choose to argue the matter. "Are you sure," he quietly asked, "that Mademoiselle Flavia counts for nothing in your choice?"

"On this point," replied Mascarot, "excuse me, if I don't explain

myself—" He paused abruptly and listened : " I fancied I heard someone knocking," he said at last. " Hark ! "

Yes, there was a knock at the door ; and the doctor, rising to his feet, prepared to regain his hiding-place. But Mascarot detained him. " It is only Beaumarchef," he said, and he touched a gilt bell on his desk. The next moment indeed, Beaumarchef entered the room. With an air of mingled respect and familiarity, he saluted the doctor and the agent in a military fashion, his hand to his forehead and his elbow raised to the height of his eyes.

" Ah ?" said the doctor, gaily, " so you still take your little drops of brandy neat ?"

" Only a few, sir, very few," he answered modestly.

" Too many, Beaumar, much too many. Do you think I can't see ; your inflamed complexion, your nose, and your eyelids all tell the story."

" And yet, sir, I assure you—"

" You know what I said to you, that you were threatened with asthma. Note the movements of your pectoral muscles—your lungs are obstructed."

" That is because I have been running, sir."

This conversation was not to the taste of Mascarot, and so he hastened to interrupt it. " If he is out of breath," he said, " it is because he has tried to repair a very great piece of carelessness on his part. Well, how did you succeed, Beaumar ?"

" We have got her, sir," he answered triumphantly.

" That's capital," responded Mascarot.

" What are you talking about ?" asked the doctor.

With a finger on his lips, Mascarot gave his friend a warning glance, and then, in an off-hand tone that was by no means habitual, he answered : " Beaumar has been after a woman named Caroline Schimmel, an old servant of the Champdoce family, who has a little matter of business with me. Go on, Beaumar—so you have found her ?"

" Yes, thanks to an idea that came to me."

" Pshaw ? Are you going to have ideas at this time of life ?"

Beaumarchef looked vastly important. " It was like this," he continued. " On going out with Toto-Chupin, I said to myself—the woman went up the street to be sure, but, knowing her habits, it is quite impossible she went as far as the Boulevard without entering a wine-shop."

" Well reasoned," nodded the doctor approvingly.

" In consequence, Toto and I, just looked into every shop we passed ; and true enough, as we reached the Rue du Petit Carreau, we found Caroline in a tobacconist's shop where liquors are sold."

" And Toto is looking after her now ?"

" He swore to me, sir, that he would walk in her shadow until you said ' enough !' And, besides, he promised to let you have a report every day."

Mascarot rubbed his hands. " I am pleased with you, Beaumar," he said, " very much pleased indeed."

The compliment appeared to delight the assistant-partner, who wiped his brow, but did not withdraw. " That's not everything, sir," he resumed.

" What else, then ?"

" Downstairs, I met La Candèle, on his way back from the Place du Petit Pont, and he had just seen—"

" Ah, indeed ! What had he seen ?"

" That young woman, sir, driving away in a brougham with two horses. Of course he followed, and she is now installed in the Rue de Douai, in a

most gorgeous apartment, so the door-keeper of the house says. And it seems, sir, that the girl is a great beauty. *La Candèle* went on like a madman about her. He says that her eyes are extraordinary."

The doctor looked up quickly. "Our friend Tantaine was correct in his description, then?"

Mascarot frowned austerity. "Perfectly so," he answered, "and this proves, Hortebize, the justice of the objection you made a short time ago. Such a conspicuously beautiful girl is a danger, and the fool who has carried her off may himself even become a nuisance, under her influence."

Beaumarchef here ventured to touch Mascarot's arm; he had got another idea. "If you wish to get rid of that dandy," he said, "I can tell you how."

"How, pray?"

Instead of answering, the ex-noncommissioned officer fell into the attitude of a fencing-master. "One, two—parry—thrust—parry—'nother thrust and all over."

"A Prussian quarrel," murmured Mascarot. "A duel! That would not do us any good. The girl would still be on our hands; and violent measures are always more or less compromising." He reflected for a moment, and then, taking off his spectacles and wiping them slowly, he looked intently at the doctor. "Suppose," said he, "suppose we pressed some epidemic into our service. What do you say, doctor, to this girl having the small-pox? Then her beauty would be gone."

The physician looked pensive. "Under certain circumstances," he answered, "we might call disease to our aid; but even if Rose were disfigured she would still be dangerous. It is her love for Paul that we have to fear, not his for her, and with a woman, fidelity is always in proportion to her ugliness."

"That is a point for discussion," rejoined Mascarot. "In the meanwhile, we must protect ourselves from present danger. A short time ago, Beaumarchef, I told you to draw up a statement of this Gandelu's affairs. What is his situation?"

"He is overwhelmed with debts, sir, but his creditors do not press because of his prospective fortune—"

"You are a fool, Beaumar," interrupted Mascarot. "A fellow like Gandelu, head over heels in debt and head over heels in love, can surely be trapped somehow or other. Among those creditors of his, there must certainly be two or three of our set, ready to act as I desire. Obtain information on that point, and report it to me this evening—and now leave us."

Once alone, the two friends remained for some time absorbed in silent reflection. The moment was a decisive one. They were still uncommitted to any course of action, but, if once they put their hands to the plough, they must go forward without hope of retracing their steps. Now, although their natures were strong enough to enable them to look the matter straight in the face and decide accordingly, the doctor's semipertinal smile faded gradually away, as he pursued his train of thought, and it was with a feverish hand that he rattled his medallion. Was he hesitating? Perhaps so. However, Mascarot, at all events, was determined. "Let us deliberate no longer," he said. "We will close our eyes and march on. You heard the promises made by the Marquis de Croisenois. He gave us our task, but with certain conditions. He must marry Mademoiselle de Mussidan."

"I doubt whether he will."

"He must, I say, since we wish it, and it shall be so. In proof of this,

before a couple of hours are over, the projected marriage between Mademoiselle Sabine and the Baron de Breuli-Faverlay will be broken off."

The doctor sighed. "I understand Catenac's scruples," he murmured. "Ah! if I only had a million like him."

During these last few minutes Mascarot, going to and fro from his sleeping-room to his private office, rapidly changed his clothes. "Are you ready?" he asked Hortebize.

"Yes, since there is no retreating."

"Then let us be off." And opening the door the agent called out, "Beaumar, send for a cab."

IV.

IF there is one quarter of Paris more highly favoured than others it is surely that which lies between the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré on one side, and the Seine on the other, which commences at the Place de la Concorde, and ends at the Avenue de l'Impératrice. In this delightful district of the great city millionaires grow and blossom spontaneously like rhododendrons at certain altitudes. There stand their superb mansions with spacious gardens, where the lawns are always green, the flowers always blooming, and the tall trees always tenanted by carolling birds. Among all these magnificent mansions, none surely are more desirable than the Hôtel de Mussidan, the last work of poor Sévair, the architect, who died just as the world was beginning to recognize his merit.

Standing between a wide gravelled courtyard and a shady garden, the Hôtel de Mussidan offers an aspect of mingled grandeur and elegance. There is but little carving around the windows and along the cornices, no encrusted or tessellated colour-work on the façade, but the proportions are admirable and each line is calculated to impart effect. A broad flight of steps in white marble, with a double balustrade and sheltered by a lightly built marquise in bronze, leads to the grand entrance. Of a morning, at seven o'clock or so, the wayfarer who glances through the open iron-work of the gateway fronting the street—the Rue de Matignon—will see the servants passing to and fro in the courtyard, where everything shows that this is the abode of a noble and wealthy family. There stands the ceremonial barouche, waiting to be washed, or the count's phaeton, or the quiet brougham which the countess uses when she goes out shopping. And that superb chestnut thoroughbred, so sleek and glossy, which a groom is carefully saddling, is Murette, the favourite, often mounted by Mademoiselle Sabine, of a morning before breakfast.

It was a short distance off, at the corner of the Avenue Matignon, that Mascarot and his worthy friend stopped their cab, and paying the driver dismissed him. As they walked up the street, Mascarot, with his black clothes, his white cravat, and his blue spectacles, might readily have been taken for some grave magistrate. As for the physician, although a little paler than usual, he was as smiling as ever. "Now," said Mascarot, "let us make our last arrangements. The count and countess consider you a friend."

"By no means. A mere physician, whose ancestors were not among the crusaders, could hardly aspire to the friendship of the Mussidans."

"But the countess knows you. She will not refuse to hear you, nor call for help when you open your lips. By entrenching yourself behind some

nameless rascal you can even save your own reputation. I, in my turn, will interview the count."

"Be careful," said the doctor, thoughtfully. "The count is frightfully violent. He is a man who, at the first word he doesn't like, would not hesitate to pitch you out of the window."

Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. "I can bring him to terms," he said, disdainfully.

"Be on your guard, nevertheless."

The two friends were now passing the Hôtel de Mussidan, and the physician having briefly explained its internal arrangements, they continued to walk on.

"I will manage the husband," said Mascarot, "and you will take care of the wife. I shall insist on the count withdrawing his word from M. de Breulh-Faverlay, but I shall not mention the name of the Marquis de Croisenois. You, on the contrary, must come out with the Croisenois side of the affair, and scarcely speak of M. de Breulh."

"Be easy, my lesson is learned; I shall not forget it."

"The beautiful part of the business, my dear doctor, is that the husband will be very anxious as to his wife's opinion; while she, on her side, will wonder what her husband may say. When they meet after we have left them, the first who suggests breaking off the marriage with M. de Breulh will be astonished to find the other quite agreeable."

This idea so tickled the doctor's fancy that he laughed aloud. "And as we approach them from such different directions," he said, "they will never suspect any complicity between us. Decidedly, friend Baptstin, you are more ingenious than I supposed."

"Wait awhile, and compliment me when the battle's won."

As they reached the Faubourg Saint Honoré, Mascarot espied a café and walked towards it. "Go in there and wait for me, doctor, while I make a certain call you know of. I will call for you on my return. If the answer I bring be 'yes,' I will go at once to see the count, and twenty minutes later you must call on the countess."

The clocks were striking four, when these honourable partners shook hands and separated. Dr. Hortebize entered the suggested café while B. Mascarot followed the Faubourg St. Honoré beyond the Rue du Colysée, when sighting a wine shop he opened the door and walked in. The landlord of this well-known, we might almost say celebrated, establishment, had not considered it necessary to have his name painted above his door, but throughout the neighbourhood he was known as Father Canon. The wine he served to passers-by and chance customers over the metal counter was, as he himself honestly admitted, about as bad as it could be; but then he held in reserve for his usual patrons—the coachmen and footmen of the neighbourhood—a special vintage from the vicinity of Mâcon, which in addition to other qualities had that of rising rapidly to the head, so that more than one servant, having too freely imbibed of it, had received warning from his master or mistress.

On seeing so well-dressed, and especially so solemn a looking gentlemen as B. Mascarot enter his shop, Father Canon condescended to come forward and take his order in person. In France, the land of smiles, a grave countenance is the best of passports. "What do you wish, sir?" asked the wine vendor, with immense suavity.

"I should like," answered Mascarot, "to speak to a man named Florestan."

"In the service of the Comte de Mussidan, I believe?"

"Precisely. He made an appointment with me here—"

"He is below in the music-room," said Father Canon. "I will send for him."

"Oh ! do not trouble yourself—I will go down myself;" and without waiting for a rejoinder, Mascarot went toward a staircase leading to the cellars.

"It seems to me," muttered Father Canon, "that I have seen this lawyer before."

The stairs were sufficiently wide, not over steep, and in default of light there was at least a hand rail. Mascarot descended a score of steps, and reaching a door, thickly padded on either side, hastily pushed it open. At once—like gas streaming through a crack—strange, fantastic sounds darted up the stairs into the shop above ; but Mascarot was neither terrified nor astonished. He descended three more steps, pushed open another door, padded like the first one, and reached the threshold of a large vaulted room, arranged as a café, and lighted by gas, with tables and chairs all round, and numerous Jeameses gaily imbibing the noted Mâcon wine.

In the centre of the room, two men in their shirt sleeves and with puffed out crimson faces, were blowing on huge hunting-horns of the approved Dampierre pattern, while near them an old fellow, wearing long leather gaiters buttoning above the knee, a scarlet vest and a broad undressed leather belt secured by a buckle bearing a coat-of-arms, was whistling an air, which the horn-blowers tried to imitate. But a general hush ensued as the agent hat in hand bowed round the room.

"Ah ! it's Papa Mascarot," exclaimed a superbly whiskered young fellow, in velvet breeches and white stockings and pumps. "Welcome ; I expected you, and a clean glass is here in readiness."

Mascarot, without waiting to be urged, took a seat at the table and poured out a glass of wine, which he drank with evident satisfaction.

"Was it Father Canon," resumed this young man, who was the Florestan the agent had asked after, "that told you I was here ? It is a very good place to be in ; don't you think so ?"

"I do indeed."

"The police, as you know, don't allow horns to be blown in Paris ; so Papa Canon has just settled us in this cellar, where we can blow away as much as we like. We can't be heard outside, for the doors are padded and there are no windows ; but we receive a supply of air from the two pipes you can see there above."

The two musical students having resumed their lesson, Florestan was obliged to carry his two hands to his mouth to serve as a kind of speaking trumpet, and shout with the full force of his lungs. "That old man," said he, "is an old huntsman in the Duc de Champdoce's service. He has not his equal with a horn. I have taken only twenty lessons of him, and I can already do wonders. Would you like me to sound you a 'stag found,' a 'full cry,' a 'change of scent,' a 'hallali,' or—"

"Thanks," cried Mascarot, seeking to hide his terror. "Some day, when I have more time, I shall be delighted to hear you exhibit your acquirements ; but to-day I am somewhat hurried, and besides, I am anxious to have a few words in private with you."

"I'm agreeable ; but I fancy that you would prefer another place for our conversation. Let us go up-stairs and ask for a private room."

Father Canon's private rooms were not very luxurious, nor were they particularly secluded, being merely separated one from another by thin

partitions fitted with windows of dull glass. Still they were usually discreet as regards the conversation they heard, providing the speakers moderated their tone ; and this was, after all, the important point. "Ah, if these walls could talk, what strange stories they would have to tell!" Thus spoke Florestan as he sat down opposite Mascarot, at a small table, whereon Father Canon speedily placed a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"I dare say," said Mascarot ; "but I care little for scandal. I asked you to meet me here, Florestan, as you are in a position to do me a small favour."

"Anything in my power," answered the young man.

"Now, then, we will begin by a few words about yourself. How do you get on with your Count de Mussidan?"

A startling familiarity of speech and address was one of Mascarot's characteristics. This revolted many of his clients, but Florestan was not of the number. "I am not pleased with my situation there," he answered, "and in fact I've already asked Beaumarchef to find me something else."

"I can't understand that. All your predecessors in the count's service say that it is perfectly satisfactory."

"Try it yourself, then," interrupted the valet. "In the first place, he is awfully stingy."

Mascarot made a gesture implying what contempt he entertained for such a failing.

"Then," continued Florestan, "he is as suspicious as a cat. He never leaves anything about, not a letter, not a cigar, nor a louis. He spends half his time unlocking the cupboards and drawers, and locking them up again, and actually sleeps with his keys under his pillow."

"I admit that such distrust is very galling."

"Indeed it is : and, in addition, he is frightfully violent. His eyes flash for nothing, and he looks as if he was going to kill you or knock you down twenty times in the day. To tell you the truth, he frightens me."

This sketch, coming after Hortebize's warning seemed to render Mascarot thoughtful. "Is the count always like this, or only occasionally?" he asked.

"He is always bad enough, but when he has been drinking or gambling, he is ever so much worse. He never comes home till four in the morning—even when he comes home at all."

"And what does the countess say to that?"

Florestan laughed and looked at Mascarot as if he half thought him a simpleton. "Madame? She doesn't trouble herself much about her lord and master, I can tell you. Sometimes they don't see each other for weeks: all she cares for is to have plenty of money to spend. You should just see the creditors swarming round the house."

"But the Mussidans are very rich."

"Enormously rich ; but nevertheless there are times when there isn't a franc in the house. Then madame is like a tigress. She sends round to her friends to borrow, no matter what—a hundred francs, fifty, even ten, and at times she is actually refused."

"But that's very humiliating."

"Not to her. But when really a large sum is required, madame sends to the Duc de Champdoce, and he never says no. And yet she doesn't waste words on him."

Mascarot smiled. "One would think," he said that you knew what the countess writes when—"

"To be sure! I like to know what errands I'm sent on. Well, she simply writes to him, 'My friend, I need so much,' and he sends it her without flinching. Of course it's easy to see that there is, or has been something between them."

"I should certainly think so."

"Of course; besides, when my master and mistress do meet, it is only to quarrel. And such quarrels! In a mechanic's home, when the husband has drank too much, he thrashes his wife, who screams and cries. But that's nothing. They go to bed, kiss and make up, and it's all over. But these people say things to each other in cold blood that neither can ever forgive."

Mascarot listened to these particulars with such an absent air that one might have believed him previously aware of them. "Then," said he, "there is only Mademoiselle Sabine who is a pleasant person to serve."

"Oh, she is always kind and civil."

"So you think her fiancé, M. de Breulh-Faverlay, will be a happy man?"

"Happy enough, I suppose; but that marriage will perhaps—" Florestan paused as if seized by a sudden scruple. He looked round the room as if to make sure that no one could overhear him, and then in a low voice, and in a most mysterious manner, continued, "Mademoiselle Sabine has been so left to herself, that she is as free as if she were a young man. Do you understand?"

Mascarot became very attentive. "Do you mean," he asked, "that the young lady has a lover?"

"Precisely."

"But that's quite impossible; and allow me to say it's very wrong for you to repeat such slander."

This remark seemed to excite the valet to an extraordinary degree. "Slander!" he exclaimed. "I know what I know. If I talk of a lover it is because I've seen him with my own eyes—not once, but twice."

From the manner in which Mascarot hastily took off his spectacles, wiped and replaced them, Florestan saw that his listener was interested to the highest degree. "Tell me," said the agent, "tell me how this happened."

"Well, the first time was at church one morning, when my young lady went alone to mass. It began to rain suddenly, and Modeste, her maid, begged me run round with an umbrella. So off I started; and on entering the church what did I see? Why, Mademoiselle herself standing near the *benitier*, and talking with a young man. Naturally, I slipped behind a pillar and watched."

"But this is not what you call a certainty, is it?"

"Why, of course it is; and that's how you would call it, had you seen the way the two looked at each other."

"What sort of person was the young man?"

"Handsome, about my height, and well built, with a distinguished air."

"And what about the second time?"

"Ah! that's a long story. However, one day I was told to accompany mademoiselle, who was going to visit a friend living in the Rue Marbeuf. Very good; but at the corner of the Champs Elysées mademoiselle motioned me to approach, and then said, 'Florestan, I forgot to post this letter; run as quick as you can to the post-office. I will wait here for you.' So saying she handed me a note."

"And you read it?"

"No, indeed ! I said to myself : There is something going on here. She wants to get rid of me, so I had better remain. That decided, instead of posting the letter, I hid behind a tree and waited. Scarcely was I out of sight than I saw the fellow whom I had seen in the church come quickly round the corner. I had some difficulty in recognising him, for he was now dressed like a common workman, in a white blouse soiled with plaster. They talked together for ten minutes or so, and mademoiselle gave him something that looked to me like a photograph. And now what do you say of my certainties ?"

As he finished, Florestan noticed that the bottle of wine was empty, and he was about to call for another when Mascarot intervened. "No, no," he said, "it is growing very late, and is time I should say what I wish you to do for me. The count is at home at this hour, I suppose ?"

"I should rather think he was ! He slipped on the stairs a couple of days ago, and has not gone out since."

"Well, my lad, it's absolutely necessary I should speak to your master. If I sent up my card he would no doubt refuse to receive me, and so I rely on you to introduce me into his presence."

For a moment Florestan made no answer. "That's a tough task, let me tell you," he said at last. "The count doesn't like unexpected visitors. However, as I don't mean to stay with him, and as it's for you—well—yes—I'll risk it."

Mascarot had already risen. "We must not reach the house together," he said. "Go on first. I will settle here, and follow you in five minutes' time. Remember, you must look as if you had never seen me before."

"Don't be anxious, but remember you have to find me a good place !"

As agreed, the honest and punctilious Mascarot settled the score due to Father Canon, and then called at the café to acquaint Dr. Hortebize with the result of his errand. A few moments later Florestan, in his most respectful voice, announced to his master,

"Monsieur Mascarot."

V.

It is certain that "B. Mascarot, Director of the Employment Agency of the Rue Montorgueil," to use his own descriptive phraseology, was gifted with a prodigious amount of impudence. He had, mentally, so often travelled over the unexplored field of probabilities and possibilities, that nothing could surprise him, or take him unawares. He was always on the watch, always prepared ; as ready for defence as for attack. He often compared himself to those skilful circus riders, who, after mastering animals, specially trained to throw whomsoever bestride them, can tackle the most vicious steeds with success. And this comparison was not exaggerated. Mascarot was a man of great dexterity and nerve.

Still, as he mounted the magnificent staircase of the Mussidan mansion, illuminated with superb lamps, for it was now dusk, the agent—he admitted it himself to Dr. Hortebize a few hours later—felt his legs quake and his heart beat with extraordinary vehemence. He turned his tongue in his mouth seeking for absent saliva to moisten his parched lips, as, duly preceded by Florestan, he crossed an ante-room, furnished with velvet couches, and at last reached the threshold of the library—a vast apartment, decorated with a certain severity of taste

On hearing this plebeian name of Mascarot, which sounded as much out of place as a drunkard's oath in the room of some pure young maiden, M. de Mussidan quickly raised his head. He was seated at the further end of the room, reading by the light of several wax tapers standing in candelabra of exquisite workmanship. Letting his paper fall on his knees, he settled his glasses on his nose, and looked with infinite surprise at Mascarot, who, with his hat in his hand, and his heart in his mouth, slowly came forward, babbling unintelligible apologies. This examination availed him little, and the count half rose, as he asked, "Whom do you wish to see, sir?"

"Yourself, the Comte de Mussidan," stammered Mascarot; "and I trust, sir, that you will kindly excuse me if, unknown to you—"

With an imperious gesture, the count cut these apologies short. "Wait!" said he, in a peremptory tone. This time he rose altogether, limped with evident pain to the mantelpiece, gave a tug at the bell rope hanging there, and then resumed his seat.

Mascarot stood silent in the centre of the room, asking himself if he were going to be kicked out of doors. A moment later the door re-opened, and the valet who had ushered the agent in appeared on the threshold.

"Florestan," said the count, in a calm, cold voice, "this is the first time you have shown any one in here without my orders to that effect. If this happens a second time, you will leave my service."

"I assure you, sir—"

"That suffices; I have told you what you may expect."

While the count was speaking, Mascarot studied him with all the attention that personal interest could impart. The Comte Octave de Mussidan was in no wise the man one would have imagined, judging by Florestan's description. Already in Montaigne's time, one could only put half faith in the portrait of a master drawn by one of his servants. The count, who then was barely fifty, looked fully ten years older. He was somewhat above the average height, and seemed withered rather than thin. He was almost completely bald, while his long whiskers were snowy white. The sorrows or the passions of life had printed deep wrinkles on his face, the expression of which, more suggestive of bitterness than haughtiness, showed him to be a man who, having drunk life to the dregs, was in nowise minded to replenish the cup.

As Florestan left the room, M. de Mussidan turned towards the agent, and, in the same icy tone, exclaimed, "Explain yourself, sir."

Mascarot had often been received in the most mortifying fashion, but never to such a degree as this. Wounded in his vanity, for he was vain like all who pride themselves on possessing a mysterious power, he longed to wreak vengeance on the count. "You pompous old fool!" he said to himself, "we'll see if you'll still be as proud as this by-and-bye." However, he did not allow his features to betray his feelings. His attitude was as servile and his smile as obsequious as ever. "Monsieur le Comte," he said aloud, "does not know me, and must allow me to introduce myself. Monsieur le Comte has heard my name; as for my profession, I provide servants for noble households, and at the same time, when occasion requires, I act as a general business agent."

Long practice had enabled Mascarot to speak in such honeyed tones, and affect such an air of humility, that the count was quite deceived, and had neither a suspicion nor a presentiment; he did not divine the threatening glance directed at him from behind those blue spectacles. "Ah!" he

answered with a wearied look, "you are a business agent, are you? One of my creditors has sent you to me, then, I suppose, Monsieur—"

"Mascarot, Monsieur le Comte. Mascarot."

"Mascarot, then—very well, sir—these people are absurd, as I have often told them. Why do they disturb me when I pay, without a frown, such extravagant interest? They know they are safe. They know that I am rich, and have no doubt told you so. In fact, I possess a large fortune, in landed property. If I have so far neither sold nor mortgaged—which last I consider the most ruinous thing a man can do—it is simply because I have not chosen to do so. Why the Crédit Foncier would advance me a million francs to-morrow merely on my property in Poitou; but I don't wish to raise money in this way."

The best proof that Mascarot had recovered his self-possession was, that instead of trying to bring the count to the point, he listened most attentively to this digression, hoping to profit by what he heard.

"You may carry back what I say," added the count, "to the people you are acting for."

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur le Comte; but—"

"But what?"

"I must allow myself—"

"Allow nothing—it would be useless; what I have promised I will adhere to. When it becomes necessary for me to furnish my daughter's wedding dowry, I will pay all my obligations, but not one moment before. I will simply add, however, that before long, my daughter will marry Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay. That is all."

These last words clearly signified, "You may go!" Nevertheless, Mascarot did not budge. As swiftly as a fencing master adjusts his mask, he settled his spectacles on his nose, and in an assured voice, exclaimed, "It is precisely this marriage that has brought me here."

The count could not believe he had heard aright. "What do you say?" he asked.

"I say," repeated the agent, "that I am sent to you, Monsieur le Comte, on business relating to the marriage of M. de Breulh with your daughter, Mademoiselle Sabine."

Neither Dr. Hortebize nor Florestan had exaggerated when speaking of the violence of the count's temper. On hearing his daughter's name thus mentioned by this unknown suspicious man of business, he turned crimson, and his eyes fairly flashed fire. "Be off!" said he sharply.

But Mascarot had no intention of doing anything of the kind. "It is a matter of great importance," he resumed.

The count became altogether exasperated on finding that the agent presumed to disobey him. "Ah! so you are determined to stay," he cried, and at the same time he hobbled once more towards the bell rope.

But Mascarot divined his intention. "Have a care!" he replied. "If you ring, you will repent it for the whole of your future life."

This threat was too much for M. de Mussidan. Abandoning the bell rope, and snatching up a cane, placed near the mantelpiece, he positively raised it as if he intended striking his visitor. But without raising an arm, or retreating an inch, the latter exclaimed in a steady voice, "No violence, count. Remember Montlouis!"

When in reply to Dr. Hortebize's warnings, Mascarot had declared he had a means of mastering the count, he was not really conscious of the full extent of his power. On hearing this name Montlouis, M. de Mussidan

became ghastly pale, and recoiled to the table, dropping the cane from his suddenly nerveless hand.

It was as if he had unexpectedly perceived some dreaded phantom. "Montlouis!" he murmured, "Montlouis!"

However, Mascarot, who after thus trying his weapons now felt sure of success, had already resumed his original humble mien. "Believe me, Monsieur le Comte," said he, "nothing but imminent danger would have decided me to mention a name which must awaken such painful recollections in your mind."

M. de Mussidan scarcely seemed to hear. He sank helplessly into his arm-chair.

"It was not I," resumed the agent, "who ever thought of using such an unfortunate—accident against you. I am merely here as an intermediate negotiator between people I despise and yourself, for whom I entertain a profound respect."

By this time, and by a great effort of energy, the count had regained his self-possession and customary air. "I really do not understand you, sir," he said, with affected carelessness. "My emotion is only too easily explained. One day, whilst hunting, I had a terrible misfortune. I accidentally killed a poor young man, my secretary, who bore the name you have mentioned. A court of law was appointed to inquire into this unhappy event, and after hearing the witnesses, decided that the young man had been the victim of his own carelessness, rather than of mine."

Mascarot's smile was so satirical, that the count paused. "The persons who have sent here," observed the agent, "are perfectly acquainted with the evidence which was produced in court. Unfortunately, they also know the real facts, which two honourable men had sworn to conceal." The count started, but Mascarot seemingly unconscious of the effect he had produced, calmly proceeded. "Your witnesses, Monsieur le Comte, did not willingly betray their oath. Providence, in its mysterious designs—"

"To the point, sir," interrupted the count, with a shudder. "To the point."

So far Mascarot had remained standing, and now seeing that there was no intention of offering him a seat, he familiarly drew up an arm-chair and installed himself in it. At this audacity the count quivered with anger, but he dared not open his lips, and this alone should have sufficed to dispel all the agent's doubts of success, supposing he had any remaining. "I am coming to it," he replied. "The event we allude to was witnessed by two persons—one of your friends, the Baron de Clinchan, and a groom of yours, named Ludovic Trofin, now in the service of the Comte de Commarin."

"I did not know what had become of Ludovic."

"I daresay, but our people know. This Ludovic, when he swore to you eternal secrecy, was a bachelor. On marrying, a few years later, he told the whole story to his young wife. This woman turned out badly, she had several lovers; and it was through one of these that the truth at last reached those who send me here."

"And it is on the word of a groom," cried the count, "and the tattle of a worthless woman that they dare accuse me!—me!"

Not one word of direct accusation had been spoken, and yet M. de Mussidan defended himself. Mascarot noticed this, and smiled as he replied, "We have other testimony besides Ludovic's."

"Ah!" rejoined the count, who felt certain of his friend's fidelity, "you do not pretend to say that the Baron de Clinchan has spoken?"

The mental disturbance of this man of the world, usually so acute and well versed in the social art of dissimulation, must have been great indeed, for he did not perceive that each word he uttered furnished his adversary with new arms against him.

"No," answered the agent, "he has done worse, he has written."

"It is false!"

Mascarot was not abashed. "The baron has written," he repeated, "but he thought he was only writing for himself. The Baron de Clinchan, as you are well aware, is the most methodical man in the world, minute and orderly in trifles to a puerile degree."

"I admit it; go on."

"Consequently, you will not be surprised to learn that from his boyhood he has kept a journal in which he notes each evening full particulars of the day's events, even to the variations of the temperature and of his health."

The count was fully aware of this peculiarity, for which his friend had often been chaffed in their earlier days, and now he began to see his peril.

"On becoming acquainted with Ludovic's revelations," continued Mascarot, "my employers decided that if the story was true, mention would surely be found of it in the baron's diary. Thanks to the ingenuity and courage of certain parties, they obtained for four-and-twenty hours possession of the volume recording the baron's life in 1842."

"Infamous!" murmured the count.

"They searched, and found not only one, but three distinct statements bearing on the event in question."

M. de Mussidan started to his feet with so threatening an aspect, that the worthy Mascarot pushed back his chair in terror. "Proofs!" exclaimed the count. "Proofs!"

"Nothing has been forgotten. Before returning the volume to its place, the three leaves concerning this event were torn out—"

"Where are these pages?"

Mascarot immediately assumed an indignant air of insulted honesty. "I have not seen them," said he, "but they were photographed, and a set of proofs was intrusted to me, so that you might examine the writing."

At the same time he produced three proofs, admirably executed and wonderfully clear. The count looked at them for a long time with careful attention, and at last in a tone of utter discouragement, remarked, "Yes, that is Clinchan's handwriting."

Not a muscle in Mascarot's face indicated the pleasure with which he heard these words. "Before going on with the matter," he said, quietly, "I consider it indispensable to master the Baron de Clinchan's narrative. Do you wish to read this to yourself, Monsieur le Comte, or shall I read it aloud?"

"Read," answered the count, adding in a lower voice, "I cannot see."

Mascarot thereupon drew his own chair nearer the light. "I should judge," said he, "that this entry was made the night of the accident. This is it: '1842, Oct. 26th. Early this morning I went out shooting with Octave de Mussidan. We were accompanied by Ludovic, the keeper, and by a young fellow named Montlouis, whom Octave has been training to act some day as his estate agent. The day opened gloriously. At noon I had bagged three hares and four brace of partridges. Octave was in the best of spirits. About one o'clock we made for the woods near Bivron. I was about fifty steps in front of the others, with Ludovic, when hearing some shouting we looked round. Octave and Montlouis were having a

violent dispute, and we saw the count strike his future agent. I started to run to them, when Montlouis came to meet me. "What is the matter?" I asked, but instead of answering me, the foolish fellow turned again towards his employer, threatening him and calling him by a name which, applied to a young married man like Octave, was in the highest degree insulting. Octave heard him. He had a loaded gun in his hand, and took aim and fired. Montlouis fell. We rushed to him, but he never breathed again. The ball had gone through his heart. I was overwhelmed with consternation; but I never saw anything so terrible as Octave's despair. He tore his hair, and fell on his knees beside the body. Ludovic was the only one of us who retained his coolness. "We must call this an accident," he said, promptly. "My master fired into the wood, supposing Montlouis to be in another direction." We therefore studied the ground, carefully arranged a statement, and swore to each other not to swerve from it. It was I who went before the justice of the peace at Bivron and filed the affidavit, which was received without the least suspicion. But what a day! My pulse has been beating eighty-six to the minute. I am dreadfully feverish, and shall probably not sleep all night. Octave is almost crazy, and God only knows what will happen!

Extended almost in his low easy-chair, the count had listened to this narrative without evincing the least emotion one way or the other. Was he overwhelmed? Was he seeking for some means of consigning to oblivion this phantom of the past which had so suddenly risen before him, terrible and threatening. Mascarot watched him keenly, anxious as to the effect the narrative might have. Suddenly the count straightened himself up, for all the world like a man who, on waking, realises that he has been terrified by mere nightmare. "This is utter nonsense," he said, calmly.

"Very clear nonsense, at all events," murmured Mascarot. "Nonsense which might easily deceive the wisest of men. Nothing could be plainer or more precise."

"Suppose I could prove to you," resumed the count, "that this narrative is not merely absurd, but false; that it is the outcome of a lunatic's hallucinations."

Mascarot shook his head sadly. "We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by false hopes," he sighed; "for our awakening would be all the more terrible." He boldly spoke in the plural, thus associating himself, Mascarot, the obscure agent, dabbling in dark dishonourable dealings, with the proud Comte de Mussidan, who traced his title back to half-forgotten centuries. And strange as it may seem, the count, far from looking indignant, all but smiled. "We might maintain," continued Mascarot, "that the Baron de Clinchan made this entry in a moment of temporary insanity, were it not for the fact that it is followed by other entries. Let me read them."

"Very well, I am listening."

"Three days later," resumed B. Mascarot, "when M. de Clinchan had had time to recover in some measure from the shock he had experienced, he nevertheless wrote as follows:—'1842, Oct. 29th.—My health renders me very anxious. I feel neuralgic pains in all my joints; this utter disturbance of my system comes from all this trouble about Octave. I have been obliged to appear before an investigating magistrate. He has such a piercing look, one might fancy he could read one's thoughts. I notice with terror that there is some variation between my first statement and my second one. So as not to contradict myself, I must put my evidence down

in writing, and learn it by heart. That would be particularly useful for the public trial. Ludovic is wonderfully self-possessed and very intelligent. I should like to take him into my service. I scarcely dare go out, for I am pestered by people who insist on hearing all the particulars of the accident. In the Sauvebourg family alone, I have had to tell the story nineteen times already?"

"Now," asked Mascarot, "what do you think of this?"

Instead of answering the question, M. de Mussidan exclaimed, "Pray finish your perusal."

"Willingly. The third entry, although brief, is none the less important. It occurs a month after the event: '1842, Nov. 23rd—It is all over thank heaven! I have this moment left the court. Octave is acquitted; Ludovic has been admirable throughout. He explained the accident so skilfully, that no one in court had the faintest suspicion of the truth. Everything considered, the fellow is too clever, too sharp. He shall be no servant of mine. At last my turn to give evidence came. I had to raise my hand and swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. I was quite unprepared for the emotion which seized hold of me. At the thought that I was about to perjure myself, my arm seemed as heavy as lead, I could barely raise it to take the oath. Ah! perjury carries its own punishment. On returning to my place I felt dreadfully oppressed, and my pulse was certainly down to forty. And yet all this is the result of a moment's anger. For a whole year I must each day note this maxim in my diary: '*Never yield to your first impulse.*' In point of fact," continued Mascarot, "M. de Clinchan headed each page of his journal with those words during many months afterwards. I am told this by the people who had his diary in their possession."

This was at least the tenth time that Mascarot had spoken of the "people," whose unwilling emissary he pretended to be, and yet M. de Mussidan seemingly paid no attention to the term, and quite neglected to ask who these people were. His reticence was extraordinary, not to say alarming. He had now risen, and was walking with apparent difficulty up and down the room. It seemed as if he hoped in this way to collect his ideas, or perhaps he wished to prevent his visitor from reading his feelings by the expression of his face. "Is this everything?" he asked, suddenly.

"Yes, everything, Monsieur le Comte."

"Then do you know what an impartial judge would say?"

"I think so—"

"He would say," interrupted the count, "that a man in full possession of his senses would never have written such things. There are certain matters that a man strives to forget, which he does not even whisper to his pillow, and it is hardly likely he would commit them to paper. That paper might be lost, or stolen, or it might fall into the hands of indiscreet heirs. It is impossible to believe that a sensible man, guilty of perjury in a court of justice, of a crime punishable with hard labour, would amuse himself by noting all the particulars of his perjury in his diary, with a full analysis of his feelings."

B. Mascarot looked compassionately at the count. "My opinion," said he, "is that you will find no outlet in that direction. Your theory is not tenable—no lawyer would accept it. If the other thirty odd volumes of M. de Clinchan's journal were produced in court, it is more than probable that several other enormities quite as surprising would be found in them."

The count was plainly reflecting, but his countenance displayed no

anxiety. It seemed as if he had come to some decision, and was prolonging the discussion merely so as to gain time. "Well," he said, "I relinquish this theory. But who will tell me that these papers are not forged? Handwriting is easily imitated now-a-days, and even the Bank of France occasionally has a difficulty in separating counterfeit notes from among its own."

"Oh," replied B. Mascarot, "the identity of the handwriting can be verified. And, besides, it will be found that three leaves are missing from the Baron's diary for 1842."

"But that proves nothing."

"I beg your pardon, it proves everything. Let me show you that this new system of defence is worth as little as the other. Of course, I know as well as you that the Baron de Clinchan will say whatever you may bid him say."

"Pray, proceed."

"Suppose the torn-out leaves should accurately fit into the volume. Would not that evidence be satisfactory?"

The count smiled ironically as if he held in reserve a powerful argument. "Is that really your opinion?" he asked.

"Indeed it is."

"Then I suppose all I can do is to confess?"

"Oh! with such proofs against one it isn't a question of confession, but one of conviction."

"Very well, then—it is true Montlouis was killed by me, precisely as Clinchan has said. And Clinchan, although frightfully imprudent, is nevertheless a man of honour. He knew the reasons which so enraged me during my discussion with Montlouis, but he rightly made no mention of them in his narrative."

B. Mascarot greeted the count's acknowledgments with a sigh of relief, and yet he felt somewhat nervous on account of the turn the interview was taking, and was surprised by M. de Mussidan's easy, indifferent tone.

"However," resumed the count, "your employers are great fools to think that they can use this immense misfortune as a weapon against me." So saying, he took a weighty tome from one of the book shelves, searched through it for a moment, and then placed it open in front of Mascarot. "This," said he "is the Criminal Investigation Code. Come, see here—read clause 637. 'Criminal action, and the civil action resulting therefrom, for a crime punishable by death, or imprisonment for life, shall be barred after the lapse of ten years.'"

The count evidently expected that these few words would crush the bland personage seated before him. Not in the least! Far from looking surprised, Mascarot smiled more blandly than ever. "Ah!" he answered "I, too, know something of law. The first day that I was spoken to on this matter, I turned to that same clause, and read those very words aloud."

"Well, and what did they say?"

"Why this, 'We know all about the Code. If there were no prescription we shouldn't need your services. We should simply call on the count, and he would only be too pleased to offer us half his fortune.'"

Mascarot's air and tone of assurance were such that the count realised that some infallible means had been devised of utilizing against him this crime of earlier times. What means it was he could not say, but he realised that it must certainly exist. And yet, although his heart sank

within him, he at least contrived to master all outward signs of emotion. "Come," said he "so I have saved half my fortune; for I suppose your employers will not be so exacting, now that these scraps of paper stolen from my friend have become absolutely worthless."

"Worthless, do you say?"

"Certainly, for it seems to me that on this point the law is sufficiently precise."

Mascarot adjusted his spectacles, as he always did when he was about to say something serious.

"You are right, Monsieur le Comte," he replied. "No one thinks of reaching you by any judicial prosecution. You cannot be punished in any way, for this murder which was committed twenty-three years ago."

"Then—"

"Excuse me. The people for whom I so unwillingly act, and for whom indeed, I blush, have planned a little scheme which will, I fancy, prove as disagreeable to you, not to say disastrous, as to your friend the baron."

"And might I ask you to explain this extremely ingenious scheme?"

"Certainly: it was to give you this explanation that I came here today." He hesitated for a moment, as if seeking for the proper terms in which to expose his plan, and then continued: "Let us first admit that you will reject the request I shall have to make to you."

"Dear me, do you call this making a request?"

"Pshaw! we need not quibble over words. Well, I will suppose you decline a compromise. Now, what happens? Why to-morrow my clients—I am ashamed to call them thus—will prevail on a well-known newspaper to print M. de Clinchan's touching narrative under the title of "The Story of a Shooting Party." The names will not appear in full, so far as the baron and yourself are concerned; but the reader will easily be able to identify you, and, besides, there will be some additional particulars."

"You forget, sir, that there are courts, and that proof is not admitted in a case of defamation of character."

The agent shrugged his shoulders. "Oh! my people forget nothing, and, in fact, their plan is based on this very point. For the reason you mention they will introduce into the story a fifth personage, one of themselves, an accomplice, whose name will be printed in full. As soon as the article appears, he will create a disturbance, and bring an action against the paper. He will declare he has been infamously slandered, and insist upon proving in a court of justice that he was not even present at this shooting party."

"And then?"

"Then, this same individual will summon the Baron de Clinchan, Ludovic the groom, and yourself as witnesses before the court, to prove that he was not with you. He will employ an advocate, a member of his own band, already retained, and the advocate while speaking on the question of damages will naturally say something to this effect: 'It is clear that M. de Mussidan is a murderer, and we know that the Baron de Clinchan has committed perjury, for we have it in his own handwriting. Ludovic moreover was their accomplice, but my client, an honourable man, must by no means be confounded with these three culprits.' Have I explained myself clearly?"

Alas, yes! so clearly and with such pitiless logic that escape seemed hopeless. At one glance the count realised the future. He divined the disgrace, the scandal such a suit would cause. He pictured all France

gloating over the details. And yet such was his character, and so impatient was he of all constraint, that he was more desperate than crushed. He knew life and men. He realised that the wretches who threatened him must have reason to dread the sharp eyes of the law, and said to himself that if he refused to listen to them, they would probably not dare to accomplish their purpose. If the question had only concerned himself he would assuredly have run all risks, and resisted to the bitter end; and as a beginning, would have given himself the satisfaction of inflicting corporal punishment on the impudent scoundrel before him. But could he expose his devoted friend Clinchan, already so compromised, to the consequences a refusal might entail? Clinchan was timid and nervous by nature, and would not long survive such exposure. These thoughts and many others flashed through his mind while he paced up and down the library. He was undecided whether to submit, or to throw the agent out of the window.

His excited air and nervous ejaculations, furnished ample proof of the contest raging in his mind. It needed indeed an amount of impudence approaching to heroism to brave a man of his kind—a man who, when his blood was up, shot a fellow creature like a rabbit. But Mascarot was familiar with peril; and whilst asking himself whether he would leave the room by the door or the window, he twirled his thumbs with an air of quiet unconcern.

At last, recovering his self-control with a great effort, the count decided to follow the course which prudence indicated. Pausing abruptly in front of the agent, and without in the least degree hiding his contempt, he curtly said, "Let us end this. How much do you want for these papers?"

Mascarot had assumed the aggrieved air of an honest man, wrongly suspected. "Oh! Monsieur le Comte," he began, "you cannot believe me capable—"

M. de Mussidan shrugged his shoulders. "At least," said he, "credit me with as much intelligence as you yourself possess. What amount do you demand?"

For the first time the agent seemed somewhat embarrassed, and hesitated. "It is not money that my clients desire," he said, at last.

"Not money!" replied the count, in astonishment.

"No, but a thing which is nothing to you, and yet of the greatest possible importance to those who send me. I am charged to tell you that you may rest in peace if you will consent to break off the marriage now projected between mademoiselle, your daughter, and Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay. The leaves from the baron's journal will be handed to you whenever your daughter marries any other person you may select."

These singular conditions were so much at variance with the count's expectations that he could hardly believe his ears. "But this is absolute madness," he muttered.

"It is sincere, nevertheless," was the reply.

Suddenly the count started—an atrocious suspicion had flashed through his mind. "Do you intend," he asked, "as your next step, to impose on me a son-in-law of your own choosing?"

Mascarot drew himself erect. "I have enough knowledge of character," he answered, "to feel certain that, even to save yourself, you would never consent to sacrifice your daughter."

"But—"

"You are mistaken in regard to the motives of my clients. They

threaten you, it is true, but it is really M. de Breulh whom they wish to reach. They have sworn he shall never marry an heiress like your daughter."

So great was the count's amazement, that he unwittingly gave an entirely different turn to the interview. He still resisted, but in a dispassionate manner, answering rather the objections which occurred to himself, than the remarks of his strange visitor. "Monsieur de Breulh has my word," he said.

"An excuse can surely be found."

"But the countess, my wife, is in favour of the marriage; she talks of it constantly, and I should meet with great opposition from her."

The agent thought it wiser not to answer this objection.

"Then," continued the count, "my daughter will probably feel regret at this rupture."

Thanks to Florestan, Mascarot knew how much importance to attach to this. "Oh!" said he, "Mademoiselle Sabine, with her age, position, and education, is not likely to have any decided preference."

For another quarter of an hour the count continued struggling. It was a sore humiliation indeed, to have to comply with the dictates of these scoundrels. But he realised that he was at their mercy, and so at last he yielded. "Well, let it be so," he finally exclaimed; "my daughter shall not marry Monsieur de Breulh."

Mascarot had triumphed, and yet his expression did not change. He walked backwards as he retired from the room, bowed to the very floor, and exaggerated each mark of respect. Once on the stairs, however, he rubbed his hands together. "If Hortebize has been as successful on his side," he muttered "we may consider the game as won."

VI.

THE expedients which Mascarot had been obliged to resort to, in seeking a private interview with the Count de Mussidan, were not needed by Dr. Hortebize in reference to the countess. As soon as he presented himself, five minutes after the agent's arrival, the two footmen yawning in the hall received him with fitting respect. They recognised the man of the world, admitted to the acquaintance, if not to the intimacy, of their master and mistress. And yet their tone, and the glance they exchanged as they jointly answered, "Yes, Madame la Comtesse receives," would have given a less initiated visitor something to think about. Plainly they were surprised to be able to say that Madame de Mussidan was at home. Their surprise was natural enough, for, as a rule, the countess might be met in the Bois, at the races, or at the Academy; at some restaurant or theatre, or in some shop; at some lecture perchance, or at the rehearsal of a new opera; in the studio of a fashionable artist, or in the drawing-room of a professor of music, listening to the first efforts of some newly discovered tenor—in short, anywhere and everywhere excepting at home. Her's was one of those restless, erratic natures always on the alert, excitable to a degree, finding no pleasure or satisfaction save in the stir and bustle of society. She scarcely ever gave a thought to her husband, her daughter, or her home. She had other cares to occupy her mind. She collected for the poor after mass. She presided over a society for the relief of repentant unfortunates, she patronised an almshouse for old men. Good works how-

ever, occupied but a portion of her time. Her extravagance was unparalleled. The largest fortune would have failed to satisfy her whims. People asked themselves if she had ever the faintest notion of the value of money. Handfuls of gold melted between her fingers as handfuls of snow might have done. What did she do with all this precious metal? No one knew —she herself could scarcely have answered the question.

To these failings was attributed the estrangement which prevailed between herself and her husband. The count had to bear the burden of matrimony without reaping any of its advantages. He resided in a splendid mansion, admirably appointed, with a score of servants ready to obey his bidding, and yet he really had no home. For years and years, it was said, he had waited for his wife at lunch and at dinner. Sometimes she had chosen to turn up, but more frequently she never put in an appearance. At last M. de Mussidan, worn out by repeated struggles, relapsed on his side into bachelor life, lunched at the *Café Riche*, and dined at his club.

Dr. Hortebize knew all this and many other things as well; so in no wise disturbed, he followed the footman whose duty it was to announce his visit. In the vast reception-room, magnificently upholstered, and yet as cold and dreary as all rooms which are seldom if ever occupied, the Countess de Mussidan reclined on a lounge near the fireplace. She was reading. At sight of the physician, however, she hastily rose to her feet, and with evident pleasure exclaimed, "How kind of you, doctor, to come and see me." So saying, she motioned the footman to advance an arm-chair.

The countess was forty-five, but, tall and slender, she had almost the figure of a young girl. Her hair, remarkably abundant, was extremely fair, and thus the silvery threads, scattered through it here and there, were all but imperceptible. Her person exhaled a refined aristocratic perfume, and her eyes, of a light almost milky blue, expressed intense pride and cold disdain.

"Really, doctor," she resumed, "you know how to time your visits. I am dying of ennui. I am wearied of books; for no matter what I read, I find I have read it before in one form or another. In calling on me so appropriately, you must really have signed a compact with chance."

The physician had indeed signed a compact, only the name of his chance was Mascarot.

"I receive so seldom," continued Madame de Mussidan, "that no one now-a-days condescends to visit me. I must really set apart one day in the week for my friends. As it is, whenever I stay at home, the solitude and loneliness is something frightful. For two mortal days I have not been out of doors. I have been taking care of the count."

This assertion was so singular and so bold that it would have surprised even a better informed man. But the doctor smiled right pleasantly, and ejaculated, "Really!" in just the proper tone.

"Yes," continued the countess; "Monsieur de Mussidan slipped on the stairs, the day before yesterday, and really hurt himself severely. Our medical man says it is nothing; but I seldom believe anything that doctors say."

"I know that by experience, madame."

"Oh, as to that, doctor, it's quite a different matter. I assure you that I used to have great faith in you. Only I admit it, I felt frightened after your conversion to homoeopathy."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "That school is as good as the other," he said.

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

Madame de Mussidan was pleased to smile. "I am strongly tempted," she said, "now that you are here, to ask your advice."

"You are not indisposed, madame, I hope?"

"I? no, indeed! Heaven be praised! that would really be a blow. But I am very anxious respecting my daughter's health."

"Ah!" ejaculated Hortebize. The countess's maternal anxiety was on a par with her conjugal devotion, and the doctor's "Ah!" was quite as good as his "Really."

"Yes, indeed. For a month, doctor, I have scarcely seen Sabine, I have been so much occupied. Yesterday, however, I met her, and I was really shocked to find such a change in her."

"Did you ask her if she was suffering in any way?"

"Certainly, and she said no—in fact, that she was perfectly well."

"Perhaps she has had some little annoyance?"

"She? Why she is one of the happiest girls in Paris. But I should like you to see her, nevertheless." So saying she rang, and a servant at once appeared. "Lubin," said the countess, "ask Mademoiselle Sabine to come down here."

"Mademoiselle Sabine has gone out, Madame la Comtesse."

"Indeed, and how long ago?"

"Mademoiselle went out at about three o'clock."

"And who was with her?"

"Her maid, Mademoiselle Modeste."

"Did mademoiselle say where she was going?"

"No, Madame la Comtesse."

"Very well, that will do."

The servant thereupon bowed and retired.

Now imperturbable as the doctor usually was, he could not help feeling somewhat astonished at finding that Sabine de Mussidan, a girl of eighteen, was as free as this. She had plainly gone out without warning, no one knew whither, and yet her mother considered it all quite natural.

"It is really annoying," resumed the countess, "very annoying! However, let us hope that the indisposition I fear will not delay her marriage."

Hortebize was delighted. The countess had broached the very subject to which he had feared he must lead with infinite precautions and trouble. "Is Mademoiselle Sabine to be married, then?" he asked with an air of respectful interest.

Madame de Mussidan raised a finger to her lips. "Hush!" said she, "it is a great secret, and nothing is absolutely settled. But you are a physician, that is to say, as discreet as a confessor by profession, and I feel I can trust you. It is more than probable that before the end of the year Sabine will be Madame de Breulh-Faverlay."

It is certain that Hortebize was less audacious than Mascarot, whose plans had indeed often made the doctor turn pale and recoil. But once consenting, he could be relied on, and went straight to the point without compunction or hesitations. "I must acknowledge, madame, that I have heard of this before," he answered slowly.

"Indeed; folks talk about us?"

"A great deal. And here, let me say, that it was not chance, as you supposed, that brought me here to-day. In fact, I came to speak to you about this very marriage."

Madame de Mussidan liked Dr. Hortebize, and had often enjoyed his

witty conversation and the social gossip he was always ready to relate. She saw no reason why she should not receive him from time to time, and indeed, she willingly talked to him in a familiar way; but she considered that she had conceded him enough, and felt indignant that he should presume to meddle with the family matters of such a high and noble dame as herself, Comtesse de Mussidan by marriage, and a daughter by birth of the noble house of Sauvebourg. "Really, doctor," said she, "you confer a very great honour on the count and myself by thus interesting yourself in this marriage."

These simple words were accentuated by such a stinging glance, that the least sensitive person would have felt wounded in his self-esteem. But Dr. Hortebize was there for other purposes than to lose his temper. He had come to say certain things in a certain way. He had studied and prepared his part in advance, and was not to be turned from his purpose by anything the countess might say. In explanation and repartee he was greatly Mascarot's superior, for the agent was far less proficient in the art of conversational shading and finessing, in allowing things to be understood without saying them outright—in fact, in fully expressing what he wished to convey without wounding his listener's susceptibility. Mascarot fully recognised Hortebize's superiority in these respects, and no doubt envied it. "It is a question of birth," he would say to himself. "Hortebize belongs to a good family, he has received an excellent education, and has always moved among the upper ten; whereas I only know what I have taught myself—I am a self-made man."

But let us return to Madame de Mussidan's drawing-room. Hortebize, for the time being, submitted the countess's affront with all due meekness of spirit. "Believe me, madame," he answered, "when I accepted the mission which brings me here, I did so inspired by the most respectful devotion for you and yours."

"Ah!" rejoined the countess, in a supercilious tone, "ah! so you are devoted to us?"

"Yes, madame; and I am sure, after you have heard all I have to say, that you will have still greater reasons to be of that opinion!"

He said this in such a singular tone, that Madame de Mussidan started as if she had received a shock from an electric battery.

"For twenty-five years," continued the doctor, "I have been the constant recipient of family secrets. I have had to listen to most horrible revelations, I have often and often been in most trying and difficult positions, but never in my whole life have I been so embarrassed as at this moment."

"What! it's so serious as that?" observed the countess, forgetting to be impertinent.

"Perhaps so. However, if I come to you from a madman, as I hope is the case, I shall make you, as in duty-bound, the most humble apologies. If, on the contrary, what the person who has come to me, asserts is true—if he has in his possession the absolute proofs he pretends—"

"Then, doctor?"

"Then, madame, I can only say, make use of me; for there is one man who will serve you unto death, and I am he."

The countess laughed with as much sincerity, no doubt, as the heir to some large fortune would weep. "Really," said she, "your funereal aspect and solemn voice will kill me—with laughing."

The doctor reflected. "She laughs too loud and too soon," thought he.

"Mascarot is right. Let us be prudent." Accordingly he replied aloud, "I trust, madame, that I may laugh, too, at my own chimerical fears. But whatever happens, allow me to remind you of what you said a few moments since : 'A physician is a confessor.' That is true, madame. Like the priest, the physician hears secrets only to forget them. He must also learn to comfort and console, with more ability, too, than the priest, for his profession brings him more directly in contact with the passions and temptations of life. He understands and excuses the impulses, the fatalities—"

"And, doctor, you must not forget to add," interrupted the countess, "that, like the priest, he preaches too." She launched this arrow with a comic air of affected gravity, but it elicited no smile from Horteibize, who became in fact more solemn than ever. "I may be absurd," he said : "and, indeed, I had better be that than re-open some painful wound which you had supposed closed for ever."

"Oh ! don't fear that, doctor."

"Then, madame, I will begin by asking if you retain any recollection of a young man of your own circle, who in the early years of your married life enjoyed a certain social reputation in Paris. I speak of the Marquis George de Croisenois."

Madame de Mussidan had thrown herself back on the settee, with her eyes raised to the ceiling, and her brow contracted, as if vainly endeavouring to recall the name. "The Marquis de Croisenois," she murmured. "It seems to me—wait a moment. No, doctor, I really do not remember any such person."

Her hearer thought it his duty to quicken this rebellious memory. "The Croisenois, I speak of," said he, "had a brother, Henry, whom you certainly know, for I saw him this winter dancing with your daughter at a ball given by the Duc de Sairmeuse."

"Ah, yes; you are right. I do recall the name now." The countess spoke with admirable self-possession, and an air of utter indifference.

"Then, perhaps, you also remember that some twenty-three years ago George de Croisenois, suddenly disappeared. This disappearance caused a terrible stir at the time—it was the event of the season. The Minister of the Interior was even questioned in parliament concerning it.

"Yes, I fancy I recollect."

"George was seen for the last time at the Café de Paris, where he dined with some friends. At nine o'clock he rose to leave ; one of his friends offered to accompany him, but he refused. He was asked if they would see him later, and he answered, 'perhaps so, at the opera ; but at all events they were not to count upon him.' It was, therefore, supposed that he was going to some rendezvous."

"Ah ! his friends thought that ?"

"Yes for although he was a man of fashion, a 'lion' as people said in those times, he was yet more carefully dressed than usual. However, at all events, he went away alone, and was never seen again."

"Never again," added the countess, a little too gaily, perhaps.

The doctor remained unmoved. "Never again," he repeated. "The first two or three days his friends thought it extraordinary ; at the end of a week they grew anxious."

"You are most precise in your details, doctor."

"They are all true, madame. I knew them all at the time, but had forgotten them, and they were only this morning brought back to my mind."

They are to be found, with many others, in the report of the minute legal inquiry, which took place. De Croisenois' friends had searched after him themselves, and meeting with no success, they called in the assistance of the police. The most skilful detectives were put on the track. The first suspicion was one of suicide. George might have gone to some wood near Paris and have blown out his brains there; but then he was in a prosperous position, his fortune was ample, and his evident happiness and ease of mind showed that this supposition was groundless. Then, the idea of a murder gained ground, and the investigations were conducted on that basis. However, nothing was discovered—nothing!"

The countess stifled a yawn of doubtful sincerity, and repeated, like an echo, "Nothing!"

"The police were as disconcerted as possible, when three months later, one of George's friends received a letter from him."

"Ah! he was not dead then?"

The physician made a mental note of the countess's air and tone to analyze them at his leisure. "Who knows?" he answered. "In this letter, dated from Cairo, George said, that weary of life in Paris, he was about to explore the interior of Africa, and that no anxiety need be felt in regard to him. As you may suppose, this letter seemed suspicious. A man does not start off on such an expedition without proper funds; and it was proved that the marquis had not more than a thousand francs about him, more than half that sum being in Spanish *onzas*, which he had won at cards before dinner. The letter was, therefore, regarded as a forger's ruse. However, the most renowned experts pronounced the writing to be Croisenois' and so two agents were at once dispatched to Cairo, but neither there nor along the route had any one seen aught of the missing man—not a trace, not a clue."

Hortebize spoke as leisurely as possible, watching the countess, all the while, but her face never changed.

"Eh!" said she as he paused. "Have you already finished?"

Hortebize's eyes met hers before he answered. "Perhaps not. A man who called to see me yesterday morning pretends that you, madame, can tell what became of George de Croisenois."

In moral resistance a strong man is weaker than a feeble woman. However vigorous minded he may be, however bold and hardened, he will allow his inner feelings to be divined, whilst a woman will undergo any amount of mental torture with a smiling face. In dissimulation a young girl is the superior of expert diplomatists, even where they blend the cunning of Fouché with the genius of Talleyrand. Crushed by the weight of evidence, a man falls upon his knees, but a woman holds her head still higher, and fights on to the bitter end. God said to Cain, "What hast thou done with thy brother Abel?" and Cain was overwhelmed. A woman, on the contrary, would have denied and argued. At the mere name of Montlouis the Count de Mussidan had turned pale, and tottered as if struck by a mallet; but the countess met Hortebize's formal charge with a peal of laughter, loud and clear and fresh, such thorough laughter indeed, that it seemed to prevent her from replying.

"Oh, doctor!" she said at last, "your little tale is most interesting; but I really think you ought to consult a somnambulist, rather than me, in regard to the fate of M. de Croisenois."

Hortebize, as we have said, was expert in repartee, and played his "parts" with consummate skill. Accordingly, far from looking surprised or dis-

concerted at the countess's hilarity, he drew a long breath, as if relieved from a heavy burden, and ejaculated with intense delight: "Heaven be praised! I have been deceived."

He spoke so naturally, with such an honest intonation, that the countess was thoroughly deceived. "However," she resumed, "I should be glad to know the name of the practical joker who pretends I possess such wonderful knowledge?"

"Pshaw!" answered Hortebize, "what is the good? He has made a fool of me, and made me run the risk of displeasing you, madame: that is quite enough. To-morrow, if he presents himself, my servant will treat him in accordance with his deserts. Indeed, if I followed my inclination, I should enter a complaint—"

"What are you thinking of?" interrupted Madame de Mussidan. "Enter a complaint? That would transform utter nonsense into an important matter. However, tell me the name of your mysterious personage. Do I know him?"

"No, madame. That is impossible; he is so far beneath you. His name will teach you nothing. He is a man whom I doctored once—now long ago. If I am not mistaken he is a lawyer's clerk. He is called Father Tantaine."

"Tantaine?"

"A mere nickname, no doubt. The old fellow is wretchedly poor, a kind of cynical philosopher, with considerable intelligence; and it was precisely this last fact that troubled me. I said to myself that, plainly enough, he did not come from his master the lawyer, that he was rather the instrument of some dangerous folks, who preferred to remain in the background, and whom one might be unable to capture."

The countess could not help thinking that the doctor was too easily re-assured. "But Dr. Hortebize," she insisted, "you spoke to me of threats and proofs, and some mysterious power—"

"Certainly, madame; but I simply repeated Father Tantaine's words. The old fool said to me, 'Madame de Mussidan knows the fate of the marquis. It is clearly shown by the letters she has received from him, as well as from the Duc de Champdoce.'"

This time the physician's dart reached home. The countess started to her feet as if impelled by a spring; she was deadly pale, her eyes dilated with horror, and her lips quivered, as in a hoarse voice she exclaimed, "My letters!"

A stranger would have pitied Hortebize, so utterly overwhelmed did he seem by the consternation he had caused. "Your letters, madame?" he answered with evident hesitation, "why that rascal Tantaine pretends he has them in his possession—"

Madame de Mussidan shrieked like a lioness bereft of her cubs. "The villain!" she gasped at last; and then turning suddenly away, without further thought of Hortebize, she rushed from the room. Her rapid foot-fall could be heard on the stairs, with the frou-frou of her silk skirts against the balusters.

Left to his own devices, the doctor rose. "Look!" he murmured, with a cynical smile—"look, search, and you will see that the birds have flown." He went to one of the windows, and tapped with his finger-tips on the glass. "It is said," he reflected, "that Mascarot never makes a mistake. It is impossible not to admire his infernal penetration, his implacable logic. Taking the most trivial circumstances as his guide, he

reasons out a whole lifetime, just as the savant who, on glancing at the leaf blown to his feet by the autumn wind, says what tree it has grown on, and describes its blossom and fruit. Ah ! if he had but applied his wonderful ability, his extraordinary activity, his audacity, proof against all rebuffs, to some noble end ! ” At this thought his brow grew dark, and he began to pace the room, pursuing his soliloquy. “ But no,” he continued, “ at this moment he is upstairs occupied in martyrising De Mussidan, while I, in this room, am set to torture the countess. What a profession ! And to think this has been going on for five-and-twenty years. Ah ! there are days when I feel that I have paid dearly for my apparently easy life. Without counting”—here he fingered his medallion—“ without counting that the day may come when we shall find our masters—and then the end ! ”

He paused : the countess was on the threshold. A nervous quiver shook her limbs, she was ghastly pale, and her eyes had a strange fixity of expression, such as often shows itself in moments of mental derangement. She was plainly terrified. “ I have been robbed,” she exclaimed in a loud voice, so troubled and pre-occupied that she forgot she had left the door open behind her, and that the servants in the hall might easily overhear her.

Fortunately, however, Dr. Hortebize had a cool head. With the ease of an actor remedying a property man’s forgetfulness, he walked to the door and shut it. “ What has been stolen ? ” he asked.

“ My letters—I cannot find them.” Then sinking on to the settee, she resumed, in the curt, grating tone which consciousness of imminent peril usually imparts, “ And yet these letters were in an iron casket, fastened by a secret lock, and this casket was hidden at the bottom of a deep drawer, the key of which never leaves me. How can the letters have been stolen ? There were no outward signs of robbery.”

Hortebize had resumed his air of consternation. “ Taine spoke the truth then ? ” said he.

“ He spoke the truth,” replied the countess. “ Yes, I am at this moment the veriest slave to people whose names I do not know. They are my masters—I cannot hope to resist them.” As she spoke, she hid her face in her hands, as if through pride she wished to conceal her despair.

“ Are these letters so overwhelming then ? ” asked the doctor.

“ I am lost,” she answered.

The doctor looked as though he were racking his brain to find some loophole of escape for the unfortunate woman before him.

“ Ah ! ” continued the countess, “ I was guilty—I was foolish in those old days. I knew nothing of life—I hated, I sought vengeance. And all the weapons prepared for others are now turned against me. I dug a pit for my enemies, and now I must lie buried in it myself.”

Worthy Dr. Hortebize took care to offer no interruption. The countess was in one of those moods of utter despair, when all that is in the depths of the soul rises to the surface, like sea-weed to the crest of the waves during a tempest. “ I would far rather die ! ” she moaned—“ yes, die, rather than see these letters in my husband’s hands. Poor Octave ! Have I not occasioned him sufficient suffering already ? Ah ! I learned to know and appreciate him only too late. And now, doctor, what am I threatened with—with exposure, of course. These letters will be given to my husband if I do not consent—to what ? It is money they want, of course; a great deal of money. How much ? ”

The doctor shook his head.

"Not money?" exclaimed the countess. "What then? Pray speak—don't torture me in this needless fashion."

When alone with his conscience, Hortebize confessed that his speculations were abominable, admitted the great risks he incurred, and not having a naturally cruel mind, often pitied his victims. But the game having begun he forgot his cares, nerved himself against compassion, and went on without faltering to the bitter end. "What is asked of you, Madame la Comtesse," he replied, "is either very little or else a great deal. Everything depends on the way you look at it."

"What is it—I have strength to hear!"

"Well these fatal letters will be returned to you on the day Mademoiselle Sabine marries Henri de Croisenois, George's brother."

Madame de Mussidan's astonishment was so great that she stood motionless, as if rooted to the spot.

"I have been commissioned to inform you," continued the doctor, "that you will be allowed any delay you may ask for to modify present plans. But pray be careful, for I am quite certain that should your daughter marry any one else than the Marquis de Croisenois, your letters would at once be delivered to your husband."

As he spoke, Hortebize watched for the effect of his words out of the corner of his eye. His expectations were surpassed, for the countess rose so faint and dizzy that she had to lean on the mantel-shelf for support.

"Then there is nothing more to be said," she exclaimed. "It is out of my power to grant what is asked of me. Perhaps it is better so. I shall have no agony of suspense to bear. My fate is sealed. Go, doctor, go and say to the scoundrel who stole my letters, that he can take them to the count."

The countess's tone was so decided that Hortebize scarcely knew what to think. Was there really some insurmountable obstacle to the plans which Mascarat had matured?

"It is true then," continued Madame de Mussidan, "there are scoundrels vile enough to trade on the shames and sorrows they discover, scoundrels who earn a livelihood and make their fortunes at this business. I had heard speak of it before, but I had never believed it. I said to myself that such an idea had its sole foundation in the unhealthy imagination of novelists. I was mistaken, it seems. Nevertheless, these infamous scoundrels must not rejoice too swiftly. They will not profit by their villainy. There is one refuge left to me—a refuge beyond the tomb."

"Madame!" exclaimed the doctor, imploringly, "Madame la Comtesse!"

But his entreaties were fruitless; she was beyond all possibility of heed-ing or even hearing his remonstrances. She continued speaking, her tone increasing in violence, as she recapitulated all she had suffered. "Do the villains think that I fear death? Ah! for years I have implored it as a crowning mercy from the God I have offended. I long for the rest of the grave! It surprises you, perhaps, to hear me speak like this—I who was the beautiful, the flattered Diane de Sauvebourg, Countess de Mussidan—happy no doubt in the world's judgment! But at the time of my most splendid fêtes, when my triumphs excited so much jealousy, I had already drained the cup of suffering. And since then—ah! now-a-days my best friends, surprised at my conduct, ask themselves if I am not deranged—mad. Ah! I wish I only were. Those who are astonished by my feverish restlessness and life of perpetual excitement, don't know that I am ever and ever seek-

ing to forget the presence of a phantom by my side—a phantom which never leaves me, which follows me everywhere without relenting ! They cannot divine that solitude terrifies me—that I dare not be alone—that I must have distraction at any cost. But, alas ! I have learned by this time, that nothing, not all the noise of the universe, can stifle the murmur of my own conscience !”

She spoke like a woman who has nothing more to hope for, whose final sacrifice is made. Her clear, ringing voice resounded through the room ; and Dr. Hortebize turned pale, as he heard the servants, busy with preparations for dinner, pass constantly to and fro across the hall.

“ How have I been able to endure such a life ? ” continued the countess. “ Simply because through the mists of the future I fancied I could detect a glimpse of the light of hope. I often despaired, often thought of giving up the struggle. And it would, perhaps, have been better had I done so ; for the light I saw was but a will o’ the wisp. You have proved that to me this very day. All hope has vanished. I see only thick darkness before me ; and to-night, for the first time for many years, Diane de Mussidan will repose in a calm and dreamless sleep ! ”

The countess was in such a state of excitement, that the doctor asked himself in terror how he might subdue this explosion, which he had not foreseen. The countess’s loud voice would eventually startle the servants, and they might summon the count himself, at that very moment under Mascarat’s knife. What would happen in that case ? Why the whole plot would simply be discovered and everything lost. Seeing that Madame de Mussidan was about to rush from the room, that words had no power to stop her, Hortebize summoned all his courage, and catching her by both wrists, compelled her almost by force to sit down. “ In the name of heaven, madame ! ” he said in an unctuous, persuasive voice, “ in the name of your daughter, listen to me. Do not yield so weakly. Am I not here ? Am I not ready to serve you ? If I have consented to act as the agent of those scoundrels, who inspire me with horror, surely it is because I hope to save you. Should I be here, if I thought that everything was lost ? Count on me—on the devotion of a man who knows something of the world, and who is by no means devoid of heart. Cannot we two so combine our energies as to ward off the storm ? ”

The doctor talked on for some time in this persuasive manner, making as strenuous efforts to reassure the countess as he had previously made to surprise and overwhelm her. He was a medical man, remember, and knew how to staunch the blood and soothe the quivering flesh after performing a frightful operation. Soon he had the satisfaction of finding that his efforts were not thrown away. Madame de Mussidan listened to his rapid flow of words, and if she failed to grasp their meaning, at least they calmed her. She subsided into that state of nervous prostration which so often follows great excitement. At the end of a quarter of an hour, thanks to prodigies of skill, the doctor had succeeded in inducing her to look the situation fair in the face, and discuss its bearings. He breathed freely once more ; and as he wiped the perspiration from his brow, felt that he had won the day. For if the countess accepted discussion she must be surely vanquished.

And yet she still repeated, “ It is infamous ! absolutely infamous ! ”

“ Precisely, madame,” rejoined the doctor with alacrity ; “ but that does not alter the facts. Answer one question, if you please. Have you any special objection to Mousieur de Croisenois ? ”

"None, whatever."

"He is of good family, highly esteemed, well-bred, and well educated, handsome, moreover, and not more than thirty-four; for, as you know, his brother was the elder by fifteen years. Why, then, is it not a suitable match?"

"But—"

"To be sure he has been guilty of several follies; but can't we say as much of every young man? It is asserted that he is overwhelmed with debts, ruined in fact; but this is not true. Even if it were, your daughter is rich enough for both. Besides, George de Croisenois left a considerable fortune—not far from two millions, I should say. It is quite within the bounds of possibility that some day Henri will be placed in possession of this money."

Madame de Mussidan was too crushed by the emotion she had experienced to think of the strong objections she might have laid before the doctor. Indeed, despite repeated efforts, she could scarcely collect her scattered ideas. "Even supposing I consented," said she at last, "it would be of no avail, for M. de Mussidan has decided that Sabine shall marry M. de Breulh-Faverlay, and I am not the mistress—"

"But if you chose you might persuade your husband—"

The countess shook her head, "Once upon a time," she answered sadly, "I, no doubt, reigned over Octave's heart. I was the controlling influence of his life. He loved me then—but now? Did I not tell you I was mad? I tired out a love which would have been as lasting as life itself. I killed it utterly, and now—" She hesitated, as if embarrassed by what she wished to say, and then added, more slowly, "And now we live as strangers. I have nothing to complain of; it is my own fault. He is good and just."

"But you can try."

"That I will do, doctor, certainly; but Sabine—Sabine may love M. de Breulh?"

"Perhaps so, madame; but a mother has always so much influence with a daughter."

The countess caught hold of the doctor's hand, and grasped it so tightly that it pained him. "Must I disclose to you," she said in a hoarse voice, "the entire depth of my misery? I am a stranger to my husband, and my daughter despises and hates me!" . . .

Many persons think that it would be a very simple matter to divide life into two distinct parts: the first given to pleasure—to the gratification of every fancy; and then later on, when the fire of passion has all but died away, might come repose and household happiness. Such an idea, however, is most erroneous. Old age is the natural sequence of youth—it is the *effect* which follows the *cause*, and proves either a reward or a punishment. This is not always distinguished in life, there are such deceptive happinesses. However, all those whom duty acquaints with family secrets—the magistrate, the priest, and the physician—know this to be one of the laws of humanity. Now the Countess de Mussidan's old age was surely to be no reward, rather a punishment; and, in fact, she was already expiating the follies of her earlier years.

However, Dr. Hortebize had no time to indulge in these reflections. The count might at any moment make his appearance, or a servant might knock to announce that dinner was ready. Accordingly, he momentarily renounced all ideas of further investigation, and merely sought to calm the

countess, to convince her that she was terrified by mere chimeras, that she could not possibly be a stranger to her husband, and that her daughter did not hate her. He was so insinuating and so persuasive, he so expatiated on the result his devotion might yield, that at last a ray of hope penetrated into her desolate heart. "Oh, doctor!" said she in a trembling voice, "it is only in the hours of misfortune that we learn to know our true friends." Like her husband, the countess had at last laid down her arms; her resistance had been more prolonged, but the result proved the same—under compulsion she surrendered. She promised she would set to work the next day, do her best to break off the projected marriage, and as soon as occasion offered, name M. Henri de Croisenois as an acceptable suitor for her daughter Sabine's hand.

The doctor could hope for nothing better. On his side he declared he would keep Tantaine quiet, and bring the countess intelligence from time to time of any steps taken by her adversaries. At last, these mutual promises having been exchanged, Hortebize withdrew; his interview with the countess having lasted fully a couple of hours. How glad he was to find it over! He was Mascarot's partner no doubt, and Mascarot may have had superhuman qualities; but he, Hortebize, was at least a man. Although the weather was very cold, the outdoor air seemed perfectly delicious to him; and as soon as he was in the street, he drew several long breaths, with the happy consciousness of having accomplished a disagreeable duty. He walked slowly up the Rue de Matignon, turned into the Faubourg Saint Honoré, and at last entered the café where he and his honourable partner had agreed to meet. Mascarot was there, in a corner, seated before an untouched glass of beer, and hidden behind a huge newspaper which he pretended to be reading. In point of fact, he was dying of impatience, and started nervously each time a fresh customer opened the door. A thousand apprehensions troubled him, and he asked himself if Hortebize had encountered some unforeseen and insurmountable obstacle—one of those imperceptible grains of sand which, as Bossuet tells us in the memorable case of Cromwell, disarrange the most perfect combinations.

"Well?" asked he impatiently, as soon as the doctor appeared.

"Victory!" answered Hortebize, but as he sank on a chair, he added, "However, it has been a terrible task, and no mistake."

VII.

It will be remembered that on taking leave of B. Mascarot, his new protector, Paul Violaine stumbled down the stairs of the Employment Agency with the unsteady step of a tippler the worse for liquor. He was well-nigh as stunned by his sudden, unexpected good fortune, as if a paving-stone had fallen on his head. In a moment, without any transition so to say, he had passed from abject misery, haunted by thoughts of suicide, to a position of twelve thousand francs a year. Ay, the agent had said twelve thousand francs, a thousand francs per month, and he had offered to pay the first month in advance! It was certainly enough to bewilder a man, and it seemed to Paul that he was losing his senses. He could think of nothing but that handsome salary, so incredibly large under the circumstances; and dazzled, fascinated so to say, he did not pause to examine and analyse the various incidents which had conducted to this wonderful result. And yet they were strange enough, and well worthy of scrutiny. That old lawyer's

clerk turning up and lending him 500 francs just in the nick of time ; that employment agent, equally mysterious, acquainted moreover with the whole story of his life, and disposed to offer him such a remunerative position without the slightest hesitation.

Once in the street, however, under the influence of this moral intoxication, Paul did not think of hurrying to the Hôtel du Pérou with the great good news. Rose was no doubt waiting for him, but he did not give her a thought—thus already proving the exactitude of Dr Hortebize's prognostics.

Elated, as he was, by his sudden prosperity, it seemed to him that his joy would be all the greater could he relate, in fact, proclaim, his change of fortune *urbi et orbi*. He must find some outlet for his feelings, spend money, air his happiness, above all, move. But where could he go in such weather ? and besides he had no friends to crush with his success. Diving back into memory, he, however, at last recalled that when poverty had first overtaken him in Paris he had borrowed a small sum—a trifle, twenty francs—from a young man of his own age, named André, who could scarcely have been much richer than himself. Now Paul still had half of the five hundred francs lent him by the old clerk, he could have the thousand francs as soon as he wanted them, so why not pay his debt, and assume vast importance for having done so ?

Unfortunately, the young man in question lived a long distance off, in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, and Paul was hesitating, when an empty cab drove by. He jumped in, and gave the address to the driver with the air of a man unaccustomed to go on foot. The vehicle at once started off, and on the road Paul recalled what he knew of his creditor. Young André was certainly not a friend of his, barely an acquaintance. Paul had met him at a little establishment on the Boulevard de Clichy, the Café de l'Epinette, where he had often gone with Rose when living at Montmartre, in the earlier days of their sojourn in Paris. The Café de l'Epinette is mainly frequented by young artists, painters, musicians, comedians, and journalists, all great men in embryo, who indulge in furious disputes, and drink enormous quantities of beer. The name of the establishment is due to a piano, installed in a large room upstairs—an unfortunate, ill-used instrument, invariably out of tune, and driving folks with a musical ear quite wild by its discordant notes.

Unacquainted with André's surname, all that Paul knew of him was that he was an artist, with several strings to his bow. In the first place he was an ornamental sculptor—that is to say, he carved the figures, medallions, brackets, garlands, and arabesques, which decorate the outside of most new houses in Paris. The calling is not altogether an agreeable one, for it is often necessary to work at dizzy heights, on scaffoldings which quake at the slightest movement ; to trust oneself on narrow planks and slender ladders ; to be exposed to every kind of climatic inclemency—broiled in summer, frozen in winter, and sheltered merely by some torn sailcloth from the rain. The only comfort is, that the calling is lucrative, so that André earned a decent livelihood with his wreaths and figures. For many years, however, what he had made by the chisel and the mallet had largely gone in colours and brushes, for he was also a painter, feeling a natural, irresistible vocation for the pictorial branch of art. He had studied, worked under several masters, and at last, feeling strong enough to labour alone, he had taken a small studio of his own. From that moment, painting was not a source of expenditure, but one of profit. His pictures had been twice admitted to the

annual fine art show, orders had reached him from amateurs, and picture-dealers were beginning to inquire after his address. At the Café de l'Epinette, André was held in high esteem. The men he met there, all young fellows of culture, maintained that he had great talent and wonderful originality, and that some day he would be famous. Paul had sat at the same table with him a score of times, when one evening, sorely pressed for money, he asked him for the loan of twenty francs, promising to return them the next day. But the next day Paul and Rose were even poorer than before, their affairs going hourly from bad to worse; and then they moved and established themselves on the other side of the Seine. In short, for eight months, Paul had not seen André.

The cab drew up at the right number in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne. Paul threw a couple of francs to the driver, and entered the large, well kept court-yard. At the further end a fat old woman, fresh, and cleanly looking, wearing a white cap with broad ruffles, was polishing a brass door handle. Plainly enough she must be the concierge. "Monsieur André?" asked Paul.

"He is at home," answered the old woman, with extraordinary volubility; "and I may say, without being indiscreet, that it is a wonderful thing to catch Monsieur André here. He is always out, for you see he has not his equal for hard work."

"But, madame—"

"And, then he is so settled down and so sensible," continued the old woman, "and so economical as well! I don't believe he owes a farthing in the world. On only one occasion have I ever seen him a little the worse for drink. And as for women—well I know of none except one young lady who for a month or so—ah, I have tried to see what she's like, but she always wears a veil. Of course, it's none of my business; but I must say she seems to me very nice and proper. She always has her maid with her; and some day—"

"Zounds!" cried Paul, impatiently, "will you tell me where to find Monsieur André?"

This violent interruption seemed to shock the concierge. "Fourth floor, door on the right," she answered coldly; and while Paul sprang lightly up the stairs, she grumbled: "a young fellow who has been badly brought up! The idea of his taking the words out of my mouth in that way! If you ever come again, my young man, I shall know you as sure as my name's Poileveu, and I doubt if you will find Monsieur André at home!"

Paul was already on the fourth floor, and on the door at the right perceived a visiting card bearing the name, "André." As there was no bell, he knocked, and then listened, as one naturally does in such cases. At once he heard a sound of footsteps, a piece of furniture moved, the rattling of brass rings on an iron rod, and then a clear, youthful voice called out, "Come in!"

Mascarot's protégé opened the door. He found himself in a studio, lighted from above. The room was of good size, simple in its furniture, but exquisitely clean and orderly. Several sketches and drawings, as well as unfinished pictures, hung upon the walls. On the right was a low, broad divan, covered by a Tunisian carpet, while above the mantelshelf stood a large mirror in a carved frame, that would have excited an amateur's curiosity. On the left rose a large easel, but a curtain of green baize covered the picture on it, only its frame being seen.

André himself stood in the centre of the atelier, with his palette on his

thumb, and his brushes in his hand. He was a tall young fellow, admirably built, and very dark, with close cropped hair, and a full, silky, curling black beard. Compared with Paul, André was certainly not handsome. But the young painter had all what was lacking in the face of Mascarot's protégé : his countenance was full of expression, once seen it was not easily forgotten, his brow was broad and proud, his mouth firmly curved, and his frank smile and honest eyes bespoke at once his loyalty, intelligence, goodness of heart and energy.

One singularity immediately struck Paul. André, who had evidently been painting, wore no artist's blouse, but was dressed with extreme care, if not in the latest style. On recognising Paul, the young artist laid down his palette, and came forward with extended hands. "Ah!" said he, "I am glad to see you. I could not imagine what had become of you."

This friendly greeting annoyed and embarrassed Mascarot's protégé. "I have had a thousand disappointments," he began, "a thousand cares—"

"And Rose?" interrupted André; "you bring me good news of her, I hope. Is she as pretty as ever?"

"Just the same," answered Paul, indifferently. "But you must excuse me," he added, "for having vanished so entirely from your view. I come to thank you now, and to return your loan."

The young painter shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "Pshaw!" said he, "you were the only one of us two who could have remembered such a bagatelle. Don't stand on ceremony with me—don't let this give you any inconvenience."

These words displeased Paul. His vanity was offended. He fancied this seeming generosity concealed a desire to humiliate him. However, he had at all events a delightful opportunity of showing his superiority.

"Oh," he answered, conceitedly, "it gives me no possible inconvenience. I was, I admit, very poor at the time you obliged me, but I am now in receipt of a salary of twelve thousand francs."

He thought the artist would be dazzled, and allow some envious exclamation to escape him; but he found himself mistaken, and was obliged to add, "At my age it is very pleasant."

"Magnificent, I should call it. And may I ask, if it is not an indiscretion, what your employment is?"

This question was perfectly natural under the circumstances; but as Paul could not answer it, for he was as yet in utter ignorance of his future duties, it wounded him as if it had been a premeditated insult. "I work!" he answered, straightening himself up.

His manner was so singular that André, a thousand leagues from the truth, could not conceal his surprise. "As for myself," he answered, "it seldom happens that I remain idle."

"No doubt," rejoined Paul, "but I am obliged to exert myself more than you, as I have no one to interest himself in my future, neither friend nor protector!" The ungrateful fellow had forgotten Mascarot.

His words seemed to furnish André considerable amusement. "Protectors!" quoth he. "Do you imagine that the State provides foundlings with protection?"

Paul looked amazed. "What!" he asked, "are you—"

"A foundling? Yes. And I make no mystery of it. For though it might give me occasion to weep, it surely has never made me blush. All my comrades know that such is the case, and I am surprised you are ignorant of it. I am simply a foundling from the Vendôme hospital,

where, by the way, I must have left the reputation of being a little good-for-nothing."

" You ? "

" Yes, I ; and frankly I don't feel the least remorse. But to explain myself. Until I was twelve years old I was the happiest of children, for my teachers were pleased with me. I worked all day in the garden along the Loire, and in the evening I wasted a vast amount of paper, for even then I had determined to be an artist. But there is nothing lasting in the world, and one day the Superior took it into her head to apprentice me to a tanner."

Paul was seated on the divan, and as he listened, he rolled a cigarette. He was about to light it, when André hastily exclaimed, " I beg your pardon, but you will oblige me by not smoking here."

Without asking the reason for this request, for the painter was an incessant smoker himself, Paul tossed his match aside. " All right," said he ; " but pray go on with your story."

" Oh ! willingly ; it is not very long. This trade of a tanner was disagreeable to me from the first moment ; and on the second day an awkward workman upset a kettle of boiling water, which scalded me so cruelly that I still bear the marks." As he spoke, he turned up his right sleeve and showed a large scar extending from his elbow to his shoulder. " Disgusted and scalded, I implored the Superior, a terrible woman with spectacles, to apprentice me to some other trade ; but my entreaties were useless. She had sworn that I should be a tanner ! "

" That was hard."

" Harder than you think ! However, from that day my mind was made up. I determined to run away as soon as I had saved a trifle, and accordingly I became a most industrious and attentive apprentice. At the end of a year, thanks to prodigies of economy and industry on my part, I had saved up some forty francs. I decided this would do ; and so, one fine April morning, furnished with a shirt, a blouse, and a pair of shoes in a bundle, I started on foot for Paris—"

" And you were only thirteen ? "

" Not quite thirteen. Fortunately, I had received from Heaven a fair dose of will, such as some persons call head-strong folly. I had sworn that I would be a painter—"

" And you have succeeded in becoming one."

" Not without infinite difficulty. Ah ! I can see now the inn where I slept that first night I arrived in Paris. It was at the top of the Faubourg St. Jacques. I was so worn out, that I slept fifteen hours on the stretch. When I woke up I ordered a good breakfast ; and then, seeing that my funds were very low, I said to myself, ' To work, my boy, to work ! '"

Paul smiled. He remembered his first days in Paris, his troubles and disappointments. And yet he had been far more fortunately circumstanced than André. The latter was then but thirteen, and had only forty francs in his purse, whereas he, Paul, had already reached manhood and could hear a hundred and fifty gold napoleons jingling in his pockets.

" You wished to find some employment ? " asked Mascarat's protégé.

" Yes, and something more. I said to myself, that to know anything I must learn it thoroughly, and if I passionately longed to make money it was to enable me to pursue my studies. Fortunately, while I was eating, I noticed a stout man sitting near me, who was breakfasting as well. ' See,

sir,' said I, 'look at me. I am only thirteen, but I am much stronger than my years; I can read and write; I am not afraid of work. What shall I do to earn my living?'"

He looked at me from head to foot, and then in a rough voice said, "Go, to-morrow morning, to the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, where the masons meet to be hired. You'll perhaps find some master-mason who'll engage you."

"And you went?"

"Yes, fortunately for me. At four o'clock the next morning I was wandering among the groups of workmen, when suddenly I saw my stout friend of the day before. He came towards me at once. 'Boy,' he said, 'you please me. I am a contractor for ornamental sculpture; will you be my apprentice?' To learn sculpture—I thought Heaven was opening before me! 'Certainly I will,' said I. No sooner said than done. This worthy man was Jean Lantier, the father of my present master."

"But your painting?"

"Oh, that came much later. As I wished to obtain a certain education, I studied in all my leisure time. I went to school in the evening regularly, I learnt drawing properly. I bought books, and on Sundays I even employed a teacher for myself alone."

"Out of your economies?"

"Precisely; and it was a long time before I ventured to indulge myself with a glass of beer. 'Six sous,' I said to myself; 'put it by, André.' However, at last, the day came when I made my eighty or hundred francs a week, and then I ventured to indulge in painting."

"And you have never thought of returning to Vendôme?"

"Yes I have often thought of it, but I sha'n't do so until I'm in a position to furnish a sum of money to bring up some poor abandoned youngster like myself."

If André had purposely wished to wound and mortify Paul, he could not have expressed himself differently. Each of his words was full of bitterness for Mascarot's protégé, who, albeit, realised that in mere politeness he must make some complimentary remark. After an effort, therefore, he exclaimed, "With such talent as your's, success becomes a certainty."

Then, as if seeking for confirmation of his opinion, he rose, and apparently examined the sketches on the wall. In reality, however, he was strongly attracted by the heavily-framed picture, so carefully screened by the green baize curtain on the easel before him. While André had proceeded with his narrative, Paul, annoyed as he was, found his thoughts turn with strange persistency to this painting. He remembered the indiscreet babble of Madame Poileveu, the old concierge, on the subject of a thickly veiled young lady, who, accompanied by her maid, was in the habit of visiting the painter. Besides, when he had knocked at the door on his arrival, he had only been tardily admitted. Had he not heard the easel moved and the curtain drawn? And then why was André so carefully dressed? why had he asked him not to smoke? Judging by all this, Paul decided that André was in momentary expectation of the lady's arrival, and that the portrait was unquestionably her likeness. He therefore determined to see it, whether André gave his consent or not. Consequently, as he went around the room admiring each sketch and study, with ohs! and ahs! of approval, he manoeuvred so as to approach the easel in a gradual, natural style. Reaching it at last he paused abruptly, and point-

ing with his hand, exclaimed, "And this—what is it? The pearl of your studio, I presume."

But André, although naturally unsuspicious, was by no means dull of apprehension. He had divined Paul's intentions. Wounded deeply by what he considered a want of delicacy, he said nothing, thinking he might after all be mistaken, but he watched. At the very moment therefore, when Paul stretched out his arm, André did the same, and even more swiftly, so as to interpose between the easel and his visitor. "If I conceal this picture," said he, "it is because I do not wish it to be seen!"

"Oh, indeed! excuse me," replied Paul, trying to laugh off his indiscretion; but in reality he was highly displeased at the tone the artist had assumed, mentally deciding that it was excessively absurd. "All right," he said to himself. "As such is the case, I will prolong my visit and see the original since I am not allowed to look at her portrait!"

Thereupon, with amiable determination, he ensconced himself in a large arm-chair near the artist's table, and began a long story, resolved to take no notice of any of André's significant gestures, or of the fact that he constantly drew out his watch to see what time it was. Still did Paul talk on, growing more and more animated, till at last he chanced to espy, almost under his hand, a young woman's photograph. Taking advantage of André's preoccupation, he was able to take hold of it and give it a good look before remarking, "By Jove! what a pretty girl!"

At this remark André flushed scarlet, and rapidly advancing, he snatched the *carte* from Paul's hands and slipped it between the leaves of a book. His anger was so evident that Mascarat's protégé turned pale and rose to his feet. For a minute or more the two young men looked silently into each other's eyes, measuring each other as mortal enemies might have done. They hardly knew each other. The same chance which had brought them together might again separate them for ever, and yet each vaguely felt that the other exercised some decisive influence over his life.

André recovered himself first. "I beg your pardon," he said, "I was wrong to leave things which should be carefully put away lying about. Paul was already bowing with the air of a man who accepts an apology, when the painter added, "I rarely receive any one except my friends. To-day I have made an exception to my rule—"

With a lofty gesture Paul interrupted André. "Believe me, sir," said he, in a tone which he did his best to make wounding and insulting—"believe me, sir, but for the imperative duty you know of, I should never have intruded on you." So saying he turned on his heels and left the room, banging the door behind him.

"Eh! Are those your manners?" muttered André. "Well, good riddance to bad rubbish. In any case, I should have been obliged to show you the door."

As for Paul, he left the studio in a furious rage. He had come there with the kind intention of humiliating an obliging acquaintance by the display of his prosperity, but he withdrew crushed and mortified. He could not help comparing himself with this young fellow, so self-reliant yet so modest, and saw himself as he really was—petty, all but ridiculous. He hated André for all the noble qualitics he was forced to recognise in him. "However," he muttered, "he shan't have his own way—I'll see his beauty after all;" and without considering how base his conduct was, he crossed the street and placed himself so as to have a full view of the house where André resided. It was exceedingly cold, and he shivered; but certain minds

often exhibit in the satisfaction of a petty vengeance a tenacity they fail to apply to more important matters. He had waited a good half hour, when suddenly a cab drew up at the door of the house he was watching. Two women alighted, one of them, young with a most distinguished air, the other clad like a lady's maid in an aristocratic family.

Paul approached them without the least hesitation, and although the younger woman wore a thick veil, he was easily able to recognise her as the original of the photograph he had seen in André's room. "Ah, well!" he said frankly, "I prefer Rose; and the proof is, that I am going at once to find her. We will pay Mother Loupias, and leave that abominable Hôtel du Pérou, for good."

VIII.

B. MASCAROT'S protégé was not the only person who had been playing the spy. On hearing the cab wheels, Madame Poileveu, albeit the most discreet of concierges, advanced to the threshold and fixed both eyes on the young lady. As the latter entered with her maid, Madame Poileveu had an inspiration. She advanced into the street and spoke to the driver.

"Bad weather," said she "I don't envy you your seat in winter time."

"Don't speak of it," answered the man; "my feet are quite frozen."

"Your two fares have perhaps come some long distance."

"I should say so, indeed! I took them up in the Champs Elysées, near the Avenue de Matignon."

"Is it possible!"

"Yes, and only four sous gratuity. Ain't it disgusting? Heaven preserve me from respectable women!"

"Ah! respectable, are they?"

"Oh, yes, I'll answer for them. The others are more generous by far. I know both sets." At the same moment, delighted to have given this proof of his penetration, he whipped up his horse and drove away.

The concierge regained her quarters, only half pleased. "However," she muttered, "I at least know what neighbourhood the damsel lives in. The next time I will offer something to the maid, and she will tell me everything."

But this hope was a false one, for the maid in question was absolutely devoted to her mistress. She was indeed by no means pleased with the persistent glances the concierge gave her on each occasion; and as she climbed the stairs, she bitterly complained to her mistress of what she called the "creature's insolence." "She would certainly complain," she said, "to Monsieur André, and he would soon put a stop to the woman's impertinence."

But the mere idea of any complaint startled the young lady, who, turning towards her maid, firmly responded, "No, Modeste, do not open your lips to André on the subject."

"But, mademoiselle—"

"Hush! Remember what I say, and obey me. Come, we must make haste, for he is waiting."

Yes, he was waiting in all that delicious agony of suspense known only at earlier manhood. After Paul's departure, André had been unable to sit still; it seemed to him that each second was an eternity. He had opened the door of his studio, and at each time he heard the slightest noise he ran

to the stairs. At last he really heard her ; a harmony like that of the celestial spheres was the rustling of the loved one's robe. Leaning over the bannisters, he caught a glimpse of her. Yes, it was she ; she had reached the second floor—now the third—and at last she entered his studio, the door of which he closed behind her.

"Good evening, André," she said, offering her hand ; "you see that I am punctual."

Pale with emotion and trembling like a leaf, André took hold of the little hand and pressed it respectfully to his lips, as he stammered : "Mademoiselle Sabine, oh ! how good of you. Thanks !"

It was indeed Sabine, the only descendant of the old powerful house of De Mussidan, who had come to see André, the foundling of the Vendôme Hospital. It was Sabine, the maiden naturally reserved and timid, taught to respect all social conventionalities, who thus risked what was most precious to her in the world—her honour and reputation. It was she who, despite all the prejudices of her education and race, thus came from the Rue de Matignon, to the distant studio in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne. Reason finds no excuse for such daring conduct, but the heart easily explains it.

For more than two years Sabine and André had loved each other. They had met for the first time at the Château de Mussidan, brought together by a succession of trifling incidents, which set at defiance all the precautions of human prudence. Man conceives and combines project after project, but above him rules Providence—fools say chance ; and the far-seeing eye and omnipotent hand of the Almighty order everything for the accomplishment of His impenetrable designs.

At the end of the summer of 1865, André, whose constant application to work had somewhat injured his health, was thinking of travelling, when, one evening, his master, Jean Lantier, sent for him. "If you would like comparative rest," said he, "and at the same time make some three or four hundred francs, now's your chance. An architect asks me for a sculptor to execute something in the country—in a superb place, with magnificent scenery all about. Would you like to undertake the work ?"

The proposal was so acceptable to André, that by the end of the week he was on his way, with the prospect of a month's absence from the turmoil of Paris. On his arrival at Mussidan, he made an examination of the work intrusted to him, and saw that he could accomplish it with perfect ease. It was simply to restore some ornaments over a balcony which had been recently repaired. The whole could be completed in a fortnight. However, he did not hurry. The surrounding country delighted him ; he made a number of charming watercolour sketches ; and with open air and sunshine his health speedily returned. There was yet another reason why he made no haste—but this reason he dared not acknowledge even to himself. In the park he had caught a glimpse of a young girl whose eyes, as she glanced at him, had filled his heart with a new and delightful emotion. Now, this young girl was Sabine.

At midsummer the count had started for Germany, the countess had taken refuge at Luchon, and between them they had decided the wisest thing to do was to send their daughter to the old family mansion, under the protection of an aged relative, Madame de Chevauché. The story of these two young people, André and Sabine, was that of all those who have been truly young, and who have loved with sincerity. They exchanged a word or two one morning, and the next day Sabine went out on the balcony

to see André at work, taking a childish pleasure in watching him as he carved the hard stone. Although more disturbed than he had ever before been in his life, André made so bold as to speak to her. They talked indeed for a long time, and she was astonished by the culture of this young man, who, in his loose white blouse and broad-brimmed hat, had seemed to her a simple mechanic. Ignorant and inexperienced, Sabine was incapable of analyzing her new sensations. André was less able to make a mistake; and one evening, after a severe examination of himself, he was obliged to confess the truth. "I am in love with her," he murmured—"it is unfortunately too true." Then as a ray of common sense showed him the full extent of his folly and presumption, and he realized the barrier separating him from this young girl of noble birth and immense wealth, he was overwhelmed with consternation. "I must leave," he said to himself. "I must take myself off—and in all speed, without once looking round. No good can happen to me here." He said this in all possible good faith as others would have done in his place; he thoroughly made up his mind—and yet, after all, finding his heart fail him at the decisive moment, he deferred his departure and remained.

It seemed, truly enough, as if fate were in his favour. The Château de Mussidan is situated in a most secluded district. To reach the nearest village it was necessary to pass through part of the forest; and so, on André's arrival, it was decided he should take his meals at the château. He took them alone at the hours he pleased in the grand dining-room, waited on by an old servant of the house; but after a short time this isolation struck Sabine as a great inconvenience and a needless humiliation. "Why doesn't M. André take his meals with us?" she asked her aunt. "He is certainly much better bred than many of the persons you receive, and he would amuse you."

The old lady adopted the suggestion. Of course it seemed to her a most extraordinary thing to admit a young man who had been chiselling stones all day long to her table. But then she was really so ennuied. Invited on the impulse of the moment, André as impulsively accepted; and the old lady imagined her eyes deceived her when, at dinner-time, she was confronted by a guest who was not merely dressed like a gentleman, but showed remarkable ease of manner and good breeding. "It is incredible," she said to her neice, as she was making her preparations for the night, "absolutely incredible, that a mere stone-cutter should have the air of a grand seigneur! But the end of all things has come, it seems to me—there are no longer any distinctions of rank. I can only see utter confusion; we are marching rapidly toward chaos, and it is quite time I should die."

Notwithstanding all her prejudices, André found his way into the old lady's good graces, and finally completed his conquest by painting a portrait of her, which, while it flattered her prodigiously, was nevertheless a very fair likeness. From that moment he was received on the most cordial footing; and no longer fearing a rebuff, he showed himself both clever and original in conversation. On one occasion he related to Madame de Chevauché the story of his life as simply as he had told it to Paul, but with more details. Sabine was deeply interested in the narrative, wonder-struck by the heroism and endurance he had shown as a child, and by the development of the qualities which had finally won for him comparative success. She admired his courage and perseverance. He seemed to her one of these superior beings whom young girls dream about. In a word she learnt to love him, and dared to acknowledge it to herself. And why not? Their

destinies, far apart as they seemed, had certain points of resemblance. With a father and mother who held "home" in equal horror, Sabine was well nigh as abandoned as André !

Their days now passed rapidly away. Forgotten by the whole world, apparently sequestered in this isolated château, they were free as the summer breezes ; for Madame de Chevauché never troubled them. Regularly after breakfast the old lady begged André to read her the *Gazette*, and regularly, also, between the twentieth and thirtieth lines, she sank into a sleep which no one ever dared to disturb. The two young people slipped away on tiptoe, gaily laughing like truants from school ; and they wandered through the wide avenues of the park, in the shade of the ancient oaks, or else in the full sunlight skirted the russet-hued rocks of Bivron. At times on board an old worm-eaten boat, which André contrived to utilise, they drifted down the little river, past the creepers and iris and among the reeds and water-lilies.

Two months thus slipped away—two entire months of enchantment—two months of intoxication and love, although the word, love, never once leaped from their hearts to their lips. After having long fought against a passion from which he could see no happy issue, André had ended by casting reflection aside. He refused to think of the future, in the same way that a consumptive refuses to think of her malady. He vaguely anticipated some great calamity which would separate them, but while awaiting it, each night he thanked God on bended knees that He had granted him another day of happiness. "No," he said to himself, "it cannot last, I am too happy ;" and he was right.

Anxious to justify his lingering at Mussidan, André, after completing the task that had brought him there, decided to add to the decorations of the house a *chef-d'œuvre* of modern art. He determined to throw over the stone of the old balcony a garland of leaves and flowers—clematis and creeping virginia blended, so to say, in one. Each day, while everyone else was yet sound asleep, his task advanced. One morning while he was on the balcony occupied with the creepers, the old valet who usually waited on him came to say that Madame de Chevauché wished to speak to him. "She begged me to hurry you, sir, saying it was a matter of importance."

The young artist had a presentiment of impending misfortune. He divined that his dream of bliss was over, and followed the old servant with the uncertain, hesitating steps of a condemned man. As they paused in front of the drawing-room where Sabine's aunt was waiting, the valet whispered, "Take care, sir, take care ! Madame is in such a state of mind. I never have seen her like it since the day my master died."

The old lady was indeed in a terrible temper ; and, despite her rheumatism, was walking up and down the room, her high cap askew, gesticulating and rapping on the floor with her tall cane. When André appeared, she paused abruptly, threw back her head with a haughty gesture, and in a loud, masculine-like voice—such as women of the old aristocracy keep in reserve for special occasions—began, "Ah, ah ! my fine fellow ! you have had the impudence, I am told, to make love to my niece !"

She addressed him precisely as she might have spoken to a farm servant, thinking, no doubt, that she would thus awaken in him a more vivid sense of the enormity of his offence. Pale as André had previously been, he now flushed scarlet. "Madame !" he stammered.

"Good heavens ! man, do you intend to deny what I say, when your very face tells the truth ?" cried the angry old lady. "Do you know you

are an impudent knave, to presume to lift your eyes to Sabine de Mussidan ? How can you have been so audacious ? Because I was over kind to you, I suppose. Did you mean to seduce her, or did you think of asking for her hand in marriage ? ”

“ I swear to you, madame. Upon my honour—”

“ Upon your honour ? To hear you, one would suppose you were a born nobleman. If my husband had been alive, he would have broken every bone in your body ; but I must simply content myself with ordering you from the premises. Get your tools together, my man, and be off ! ”

André did not move. He stood as if turned to stone. Sensitive as he usually was, he now hardly noticed the indignity with which he was treated —he only realized that he should never see Sabine again ; and as the full force of this misfortune swept over him, he turned deadly pale and staggered to a chair. His manner was so unexpected, his bitter grief so apparent, that the old lady seemed actually touched, and resumed in a softer tone, “ I have, perhaps, been very severe with you, sir ; but I am, unfortunately, very quick-tempered. This lamentable affair is my fault in a very great degree. As the Curé of Bivron told me early this morning, I am so old that I had forgotten how young people were likely to conduct themselves when left alone. I was the only one it seems who was ignorant of your goings on ; for the whole district has been chattering about you and my niece.”

André started to his feet with so threatening a gesture, that had the six hundred inhabitants of Bivron seen him, they would certainly have fled in terror. “ Ah ! ” cried he, “ if I only had the wretches by the throat ! ”

“ Good ! ” exclaimed Madame de Chevauché, by no means displeased with this energetic language. “ Good ! but you can hardly expect to cut out every malicious tongue. Fortunately, the harm is so far not irreparable ; so go away and forget my niece.”

“ Go away and forget ! ”—she might as well have bid André destroy himself. “ Madame,” he began, in a despairing tone, “ pray listen to me. I am young, and full of courage and hope ! ”

His despair was so intense, his voice so heart-broken, that the old lady positively pitied him. “ What is the use of saying that to me ? ” she asked. “ Sabine is not my child. All that I can do is never to mention this matter to my niece’s father and mother. Good heavens ! if Mussidan only knew it, what a stir he would make ! Come, now, go away ! You have made me ill, and I don’t believe I shall eat a mouthful for the next two days.”

André left the room, supporting himself against the wall. The floor seemed to heave and roll like a ship’s deck in a gale. His mind was whirling too, and he could barely see where he was going. In the hall, however, he realised that some one grasped his hand ; and after a vigorous effort to collect his thoughts, he perceived Sabine, pale and statue-like, beside him. “ I have heard everything, André, everything,” said she.

“ Yes,” he stammered. “ It is all over ; I am driven away.”

“ Where are you going ? ”

“ God only knows ! I do not care.”

Sabine laid her hand on his arm. “ You are desperate,” she whispered.

He looked at her with eyes that terrified her, and answered, in a husky voice, “ Desperate, indeed ! ”

Never had Sabine been so lovely. Her eyes sparkled with generous determination, her expression was sublime. “ But, supposing,” said she, “ supposing I showed you some gleam of future hope, what would you do then ? ”

"What would I do?" cried André, with delirious exultation. "Why, everything in the power of man. Let obstacles be multiplied around us, I would dash them aside. No matter how difficult the conditions imposed upon me, I would fulfil them. If a fortune is wanted, I will make it—a name, I will win it!"

"You have forgotten one thing that is needed—patience."

"Ah! mademoiselle, I have that too. Don't you understand, that with one word from you I can live on hope?"

Sabine raised her right hand, as if calling on heaven to hear her. "Work," she said, "work and hope, André; for I swear before God that I will be your wife, or die unmarried. If there must be a contest, then—"

A loud noise at the end of the hall interrupted her. Old Madame de Chevauché was rapping on the door with her cane. "Still here!" she cried in a ringing voice.

André turned and fled. His heart was beating wildly. Ah! now he had a hope which would enable him to bear all trials without a murmur. What happened after his departure between Madame de Chevauché and her niece? The servants remarked that, after a long conference together, they both had red and swollen eyes. It is possible that Sabine coaxed the old lady round to her way of thinking: for two months later, when Madame de Chevauché died, she bequeathed everything she possessed directly to Sabine, her will being so drawn up that Mademoiselle de Mussidan was to receive the revenues as long as she remained single, and the entire capital on the day of her marriage, "with or without her parents' consent." This clause made Sabine's mother remark, "Our poor aunt lost her mind at last."

No, she had not lost her mind. Sabine and André understood her perfectly, and sincerely mourned the excellent woman, whose last desire was to smooth their path.

They were then both in Paris, André hard at work, Sabine true to her promises. In Paris she was even more mistress of her time and actions than when at Mussidan. She was guarded only by her faithful maid, Modeste, who was absolutely devoted to her. Thus after corresponding with André, she had at last granted him several interviews, and finally, yielding to his entreaties, she had consented to visit him at his studio, always accompanied, be it understood, by Modeste. And here, it may be added, that never a sovereign, visiting her devoted subjects, never a madonna borne in procession through a crowd of worshippers, was the object of more respectful adoration, than that offered to Sabine in the artist's humble home.

IX.

Of course, Mademoiselle de Mussidan had absolute certainty of being treated with boundless respect before she decided to visit André.

When she entered his modest studio, pervaded as it was with thoughts of her, she seemed to breathe the incense that had burned in her honour. She was so calm and self-possessed, that no one would have imagined she was conscious of having ventured on the most hazardous step a young girl can possibly take. After giving André her hand, she slowly took off her bonnet, handed it to Modeste, and then inquired, "How do I look, my friend?"

The artist's passionate answer made her smile, and she gaily added, "I meant to say, am I as I ought to be for my portrait?"

Sabine was beautiful; but to compare her beauty with Rose's as Paul had done, was foolish in the extreme. Rose's beauty was of the kind that take the senses captive, and wins the light admiration of a libertine; Sabine's was of a different character, refined and idealized. Rose chained the body to this earth: Sabine raised the soul heavenwards. To judge Mademoiselle de Müssidan it was necessary to know her, to be worthy of her so to say. There was nothing dazzling about her chaste beauty. An expression of placid resignation, somewhat mingled with reserve, greatly attenuated the impression she was likely to cause on a superficial observer. She could have passed unnoticed, like some forgotten Raphael, coated with dust, and hanging in an obscure village church. But when attention was once really attracted, no one could tire of admiring her broad brow, with its crown of braided chestnut hair; her large soft eyes, her exquisitely curved lips, and her transparent complexion. She had adopted for her portrait a coiffure, long out of fashion, but which suited her wonderfully; and it was in connection with this coiffure that she had asked, "How do I look?"

"Alas!" said André, "when I see you, I realize all my lack of skill. An hour ago, I said to myself, the portrait is finished! But now, I can't conceal the truth, my work is most imperfect."

He had drawn aside the baize curtain, and Sabine's portrait stood with the light full upon it. It was by no means a work of extraordinary merit. André was but twenty-four, and while studying, he had been compelled to toil for his daily bread. Still the picture was not wanting in originality; and although lack of experience was apparent, here and there there was a certain charm even about its very faults. Sabine stood for a moment looking at it in silence, and then in a tone of sincere conviction said, "It is beautiful."

The young painter was too discouraged to accept this praise. "No doubt it is not unlike you," he replied, slowly; "but the photograph you gave me was an excellent likeness, better even than this. I have achieved but a sorry result, for I have been unable to impart the least reflection of your inner self. It is but a superficial sketch. However, I will try again, and then—"

Sabine interrupted him with a gesture of denial. "You will not try again," she said, in a sweet but firm voice.

"Why not?" he asked in surprise.

"Because, my dear friend, this visit will be my last."

"The last," stammered André. "What have I done that you should punish me so cruelly?"

"I am not punishing you, André," answered Sabine. "You desired my portrait; I yielded to your entreaties, and do not regret having done so. But listen, now, to the voice of reason. Don't you understand that I have no right to trifle in this way with my reputation? Have you thought what the world would say if it ever became known that I have come here like this, day after day?"

He did not reply: he was trying to recover from this heavy blow. "Besides," resumed Mademoiselle de Müssidan, "what is the use of a picture that must be hidden like a bad action? Do you forget that our future—our marriage depend on your rapid success?"

"No, surely I don't forget it."

"Then hasten your endeavours André. It is not enough for me to say my choice is not an ordinary one—you must prove the truth of my words by your works."

"And I will do so!"

"So I believe, dear friend. But remember what I said a year ago : 'Become celebrated, and then go to the Comte de Mussidan, my father, and ask him for his daughter's hand. If he refuse—if my prayers do not move him—I will leave his house on your arm.'"

"You are right!" replied André. "Let us leave the portrait on one side : I should be a fool to sacrifice a future life of happiness for a brief space of present joy. To hear you, moreover, is to obey."

Mademoiselle de Mussidan reclined in the great arm-chair ; André drew forward a carved oak stool, and in his turn sat down. "Now," resumed Sabine, "as we agree so well, let us discuss our common interests, for it seems to me we have been neglecting them."

These common interests simply resolved themselves into the question of André's success, and he at once began to relate what had happened since their last meeting. "I am really embarrassed," he began. "The day before yesterday Prince Crescenzi, the celebrated amateur, came to visit my studio. One of my sketches pleased him, and he ordered a picture, agreeing to pay me six thousand francs."

"But that is a great stroke of luck!"

"To be sure : but, unfortunately, he wants it at once. Then, again, Jean Lantier, overwhelmed with work, offers to transfer to me the ornamentation of a large house in the Champs Elysées, which he is building for a contractor, M. Gandelu. He proposes I should engage the necessary workmen, superintend the whole affair, and thus net some seven or eight thousand francs profit."

"But how are you embarrassed?"

"Let me explain. I have seen M. Gandelu twice : he wishes me to begin at once. Now, I can't undertake both of these enterprises. I must decide between them."

Sabine thought for a moment. "I should do the picture," said she.

"And I should agree with you, if it were not for—"

The young girl knew her lover well enough to divine the cause of his hesitation. "Ah!" she murmured, "Will you never love me well enough to forget that I am rich? Our plans would quickly have a good result if you would only consent—"

André turned pale. "Ah! cried he, "do you wish to poison our love?"

She sighed, but did not insist. "Well," she said, "let it be as you desire. Leave the prince's picture on one side, and make arrangements to proceed with M. Gandelu's work."

It was now striking five o'clock, and Sabine rose. "Before leaving, my friend," said she, "I ought to inform you of an annoying matter. There has been some talk of marrying me to Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay."

"The millionaire who keeps a racing stable?"

"Precisely. If I resisted my father's desires, an explanation would be necessary, and I am by no means desirous of one just now. I therefore propose speaking frankly to Monsieur de Breulh. I know him ; he is an honest and straightforward man, and will withdraw. What do you think of this plan?"

"Alas!" exclaimed André, "I think that if he withdraws, it will be only to make room for some one else."

"Very likely, and then we will dismiss his successor in his turn. Ought I not to have my share of difficulties?"

But the prospect frightened the unhappy lover. "What a life yours will be," he murmured. "You may have to wage daily war with your family."

She looked at him proudly as she answered, "Do you doubt me?"

Sabine was now ready to leave, and André wished to go and fetch her a vehicle; but she refused, saying that Modeste and she were not afraid of walking, even if they did not succeed in finding a cab on their way. As she took her leave, she added, "I shall see M. de Breulh to-morrow, and will write to you at once."

André remained alone. It seemed to him at first as if part of his life had left him with Sabine. However, his depression did not last long. A happy inspiration came to him. "She went away on foot," he reflected, "I may yet see her for some minutes. I can surely follow her at a distance without compromising her."

Ten seconds later he was in the street. It was growing dark, and yet on glancing down the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne he could still perceive Sabine and her maid. They were walking fast, but he had soon covered the intervening ground, and ten paces in the rear, followed them along the Rue de Laval and the Rue de Douai. He made no attempt to apprise them of his presence but walked on, admiring Sabine's dainty walk and distinguished air, and the charming manner in which she held her dress aside without unduly raising it. "And to think," he murmured, "to think that the day may come when I shall have the right of walking beside her. Her arm will rest on mine." The thought thrilled him like an electric battery.

In the meanwhile, Sabine and Modeste had reached the Rue Blanche, where finding a cab, they hailed it and got in. The vehicle was already some distance off, and yet André lingered on the curbstone following it in fancy. However, he could not stand there for ever; and at last, mustering up his courage, he turned round, intending to regain his studio. He was half way along the Rue de Douai when, just as he passed in front of a brilliantly illuminated shop, he heard a gay young voice call him by name, "Monsieur André! Monsieur André!"

He looked up in bewilderment, like a man just wakened. Before him, near a smart looking brougham drawn by two fine horses, stood a young woman, in a most conspicuous costume, who was making a friendly sign to him. He racked his memory to recognize her. "I am not mistaken," he said, at last; "Mademoiselle Rose, I fancy?"

"Say Madame Zora de Chantemille, if you please," exclaimed a falsetto voice in the rear.

André turned, and found himself confronted by a young man who had just been giving some orders to the coachman. "Ah!" said he, starting back.

"Yes," resumed the young fellow. "Chantemille is the name of an estate I intend giving to madame as soon as my father is dead."

It was with some little surprise that the painter examined this liberal minded young spark, noting in turn his ridiculously short coat, his low broad brimmed hat, his tight trousers which showed his knock-knees to advantage, his huge watch chain and locket, his eye glass and his red gloves. He certainly looked ridiculous; and Toto-Chupin had not exaggerated in likening him to a monkey.

"Pshaw!" cried Rose, "what difference does a name make? The important thing is to persuade this gentleman, who is a friend of mine, to come home and dine with us!" and without awaiting a reply, she gaily but roughly pushed André into a brilliantly lighted vestibule.

"'Pon my word," cried the young swell, "'pon my word, I call that rather stiff! However, our friend's friends are *our* friends, no doubt. Indeed, of course they are."

André, who was quite disconcerted by this unlooked for onslaught, tried to excuse himself, but Rose, anxious to show her new-born power, placed herself on the doorstep, and repeated again and again, "You must dine with us; I insist on it. You shall dine with us; you must, you shall!"

Then, as she prided herself on her good manners, she took in her own Gandelu's and André's right hand. "Monsieur André," said she, "I must introduce to you M. Gaston de Gandelu. M. de Gandelu—M. André, the artist."

The two young men bowed. "André!" said Gandelu. "I have heard the name before; and the face is familiar—ah, yes! I have it; it was at my father's. Are you not, sir, in charge of the sculpture on his new house? Then you belong to us. We inaugurate Zora's new apartment to-night! Lots of fun you know. And the more we are, of course the merrier."

André still resisted. "I cannot accept," he said; "I have an important engagement."

"Well, break it then. You are here, and we mean to keep you."

André hesitated. He was out of spirits, and felt a strong desire to escape, from himself. "After all," he thought, "why should I decline? If this young man's friends are like himself, I shall not lack amusement."

"Come," said Rose, hastening to the stairs, "it's decided." André was about to follow her, when Gandelu held him back, whispering with a delighted air, "Was there ever such a woman! and wait a bit, you don't know her yet. Let me form her a little. I haven't my equal for starting a woman you know. Just you ask Auguste at the Café Riche. He'll tell you that I'm A 1."

"That is easily seen," replied André, seriously.

"To be sure! First, you see, I understand business. I'm straight, and square, and fair—Zora—a fine name, don't you think so? I chose it. Zora is not very swell to-night, but only wait a bit and you'll see. This afternoon I ordered six dresses for her—six dresses from Van Klopen. You know him of course?"

"Not in the least."

"What! is that really so? You amaze me. Van Klopen, my dear fellow, is a dressmaker—a man dressmaker. He is an Alsatian, without his equal. Such taste! such invention! such *chic*!"

Reaching her apartment by this time, Rose called impatiently, "Are you never coming?"

"Quick!" said Gandelu to André; "let us go up at once. When she is angry, she has terrible nervous attacks. She won't own it, but I know that such is the case. There's no deceiving me. I'm well acquainted with women's natures."

Rose and Paul were not fitted to understand each other; they were far too much alike. If the new lady of Chantemille had so particularly insisted on retaining André to dinner, it was because she wished to dazzle him with her magnificence. As a beginning, she exhibited her two servants, her cook and her maid—and then André had to visit each room, and admire each

article of furniture. He had to fall into ecstacies on beholding the everlasting and horrible buttercup and blue hangings of the drawing-room ; was compelled to feel how thick and glossy the stuffs were, and how admirably the lounges were padded. Gandelu triumphantly open'd the march, holding aloft a huge candelabrum, the eight candles of which besprinkled him with wax. He extolled the exquisite taste of everything, and invariably chronicled the price in the tone of an appraiser. His chatter was most disjointed, and André had no little difficulty in following it. "This clock," the young swell said, "cost a hundred louis—a mere nothing, you understand. It is so singular that you should know my father. Hasn't he a clear head? That jardinière cost three hundred francs, one might as well say nothing. Be very careful with my father, he is extremely cunning. He was determined on my becoming a working man, but I would rather have died. No, that was by no means dear, that table ; it only cost twenty louis. At first, you see, I did not know that he was in bad health, but the physicians now say that in six months—" He paused, for at this moment a loud noise was heard in the auto-room. "Here come my guests!" he cried, and placing the candelabrum on the table, he hurried out of the room.

André was supremely astonished. He had heard speak of these young swells, the delight of the Boulevard and the turf, but he had so far never mingled in their society. His look of stupefaction must have flattered Rose. "As you see," she said, "I have left Paul. To begin with, he wearied me inexpressibly, and at last he hadn't a sou to buy me bread."

"He! you are jesting; for to-day he came to my rooms, and told me that he was making twelve thousand francs a year."

"Twelve thousand falsehoods! Unless—well, at all events, I can only say that a fellow who accepts five hundred francs from people he does not know—" She stopped short, but signed to André that she had a great deal more to tell him.

Young Gandelu was now entering the room with his friends, whom he duly introduced. "My lads," said he, "The whole spread comes from Potel's. We'll have some fun, and by-and-bye a little gambling, just for the sake of our healths."

The guests seemed fully as ridiculous as the host; and André was beginning to congratulate himself on having come, when a servant, with a white choker, threw open the door of the salon and announced, "Madame la Vicomtesse is served!"

X.

WHENEVER B. Mascarot was asked what was the chief condition of success, he invariably replied, "Activity—activity—activity." He had, it must be admitted, one great superiority over most men—he put into practice the maxims he professed ; and so we need not be surprised if on the morrow of his expedition to the Hôtel de Müssidan, he was already in his office and at work, at seven o'clock in the morning. Although a thick fog lay over the city, and little if anything could be distinguished out of doors, the outer office was already thronged with clients. But the honourable agent did not trouble himself about these matutinal visitors, mostly composed of cook-shop servants, who after purchasing their daily provisions at the Central Markets hard by, dropped in on the chance, perhaps, that handsome M. Beaumarchef might have some better situation for them. Experience had

taught Mascarot that servants of this class, who seldom leave their kitchens, knew but little of what transpired in the eating-houses where they were employed, or even if they did know anything, it was not of the slightest value to him. Mascarot, therefore, relinquished these early applicants to Beaumarchef, and only disturbed himself when by chance he recognized, through the glass window, some face he was familiar with, that of a *maitre d'hôtel* or butler in some noble household. Otherwise he paid as little attention to the hubbub in the outer apartment as a minister of state pays to the crowd in his ante-room. He was busy classifying a number of those small squares of card-board, which had so puzzled Paul, and, as often happens in moments of preoccupation, he allowed his thoughts to exude in a flow of words.

"What an undertaking!" he muttered, "and yet what a result! I alone, it is true, bear the burden of this enormous task. I alone still hold the threads which, for twenty years, with the patience of a spider weaving his web, I have fastened to so many puppets. At a motion from me they are all alert. And to look at me, who would believe it. When I go down the Rue Montorgueil, the neighbours say, 'There goes Mascarot. That is Mascarot, who keeps an employment office for all the sexes!' They laugh, and I let them laugh. Secret power is always the strongest. The powers men know of are attacked, and oft-time overthrown; but no one knows me—no one."

A more important card than the others now passed under his eyes. He rapidly traced a line or two on its margin, and in a moment or two spoke again. "I may run aground, it's true. Some fine day the meshes of my net may snap, and some of the prey escape—and what then? That fool, the Count de Mussidan, asked me if I knew the laws of my country. I should say I did! No one has studied them more thoroughly; and I know that there may be found in the penal code, Book the Third, Chapter II., a certain clause, No. 400, which seems to have been specially drawn up with the view of hampering my operations. Hard labour for a term of years, if you please; and if a cunning magistrate knocks me over with Article 305, it becomes a question of hard labour for life!" As he spoke these words, a cold shiver passed down his spine; but it was of brief duration, for what a triumphant smile he resumed, "Yes, but to send B. Mascarot to breathe the air at Toulon, B. Mascarot must be trapped first, and B. Mascarot is no fool. Danger in the air, and Mascarot melts, vanishes, evaporates. He may be looked for, and he won't be found. As for those timid gamesters, my associates—Catenac, the miser, and Hortebize, the epicurean—I have kept them out of danger. Croisenois would hardly be suspected, and, besides, he would prefer suicide to confession. Who would be prosecuted then? whom would the police net? Why merely Beaumarchef, La Candele, Toto-Chupin, and two or three other poor devils. They would be magnificent prizes, and no mistake—prizes to be proud of! However, even they could say nothing, for the very best of reasons, they know nothing." And Mascarot, pleased with his own reasoning, laughed aloud. Then with a haughty gesture, he adjusted his spectacles, and added, "I will march straight to the end I have in view. Through Croisenois I shall make, at one blow, some four millions of francs. Paul shall marry Flavie, that's settled; and so that Flavie may be happy and envied, she shall be a duchess with three hundred thousand francs a year."

His squares of card-board were by this time in order; and he now drew from a secret drawer a small address book. He opened it, added two or

three names to those already inscribed, and as he consigned it to its hiding place, threateningly exclaimed, " You are all there, my good friends—all of you, and you don't suspect it. You are rich, all of you—honoured, and comparatively happy ; for you flatter yourselves you are free. But you are mistaken, there is a man whom you belong to, body, soul and property, and this man is B. Mascarot, of the Rue Montorgueil. You hold your heads high, no doubt ; and yet whenever he chooses you will crawl to his feet, and dispute for the honour of tying his shoe-strings. And it happens, my friends, that Papa Mascarot has worked quite enough, and would like to retire from business ; so between you, you will have to furnish him with a comfortable income."

He stopped short, hearing a knock at the door. He touched the bell on his table, and it had hardly ceased to tingle when Beaumarchef appeared on the threshold. " Would you believe it, sir," said the retired military man. " Do you remember telling me to complete the papers respecting young Monsier Gandelu."

" Yes ; what then ? "

" Why, sir, it so happens that the cook he has engaged for his little lady is in our lists. She owed us eleven francs, and has come to bring them ; she is outside now. Her name's Marie. Isn't it lucky now ? "

Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. " You are an idiot," said he coldly, " to be so pleased and astonished at this. I have often explained to you that luck or chance, as you may call it, is simply a field for labour like any other, more extended, possibly, and requiring careful tillage. Now, for twenty years I have sowed crop after crop in this field ; and it would be strange indeed, I think, if there were never any harvest ! "

Beaumarchef listened to his master open-mouthed in silent wonder at his astuteness.

" Who is this cook ? " asked Mascarot.

" Oh ! as soon as you see her, sir, you will recognise her. For a long time she has been on the lists in class ' D '—that is, as a cook for a household of a questionable reputation."

Mascarot was reflecting. " Well," said he at last, " fetch me this girl ; " and as Beaumarchef turned to obey, he added, as if answering some objection in his own mind, " It would be foolish to neglect the slightest precaution. Experience has shown me this."

But the cook of " class D " was already before him, extremely proud of her admission into the inner sanctuary. At the first glance, it was easy to see why Beaumarchef had placed her in the category he had mentioned. She was received by Mascarot with the unctuous urbanity he was so famous for. " Well, my girl," said he, " so you have found a place to your liking, and where your merits will be appreciated ? "

" I hope so, sir ; but I have only been at Madame Zora de Chantemille's since two o'clock yesterday afternoon."

" Ah ! she calls herself Zora de Chantemille, does she ? "

" You understand, sir, it is only a name she has taken. She quarrelled about it, too, with my master. She wished to call herself Raphaele, but he insisted on Zora."

" Zora is pretty—very pretty," said Mascarot, gravely.

" Yes, that is just what her maid and I told her. She is a very beautiful woman ; and, my eyes ! doesn't she make the gold fly ! I assure you, sir, she has spent more than thirty thousand francs already."

" Indeed ! "

"Yes, sir ; and all on credit, mind you. Monsieur de Ganelu hasn't a sou in the world—so a waiter from Potel's told me, and he knew what he was saying. But his father, it seems, is rolling in wealth. Yesterday, for a house-warming, as they called it, they had a dinner—and such a dinner ! It cost more than a thousand francs, with the wines."

As Mascarot saw no way of utilizing this woman, he was about to dismiss her, when she, divining his intention, exclaimed, "One moment, I haven't told you anything worth knowing yet."

Mascarot did not expect anything from this source ; but he was patient, and had learned to hold himself in subjection when necessary. He knew too that it is unwise for an ambitious man, however far up the ladder he may be, to refuse assistance, no matter however trivial it may seem, so he threw himself back in his chair, and assuming an expression of great interest, exclaimed, "Go on, if you please."

"Well," resumed the cook, "we had a great dinner ; eight guests, and madame the only lady. Ah, sir, what handsome men they were ! so witty and distinguished, and so beautifully dressed ; but my master was the best dressed of all."

"Indeed," drawled Mascarot, lifting his eyebrows.

"By ten o'clock, they were all pretty tipsy, and then what do you think they did ? They sent to the concierge, and told him not to let any one pass through the courtyard, as they intended to throw the dinner-service out of the window. And they did it, too. Dishes and plates, glasses and bottles, all flew pell-mell. It seems its an aristocratic practice. The waiters from Potel's told me it was a fashion introduced into Paris by some Russian princes."

Mascarot closed his eyes in despair behind his spectacles. The most heroic resignation has its limits, and so he asked, "Well, well, what did you notice at all curious ?"

"Well, sir, among these gentlemen there was one who was tall and dark, badly dressed, and who said nothing. You might have really thought that he was laughing in his sleeve at all the others. However, madame was as sweet as honey to him. She offered him all the delicacies on the table. Will you take this ? and will you take that ? You are not drinking, and so on. After dinner, while the others were playing cards, he sat down by my mistress and began to talk with her."

"And could you hear what they said ?"

"Of course I could : they were near the bedroom door, and so I set it ajar and listened to them."

"That was not very honourable," said Mascarot, in a shocked tone.

"Who cares ? I always like to know the private affairs of the people I serve. They were talking of a gentleman madame had known before, a friend of the dark man's—his name, ah ! his name, dear me, I've forgotten it—wait a bit !"

Beaumarchef, who had been in the background long enough, thought it was now time to show his admirable memory. "Paul Violaine," said he.

"Precisely," answered the cook, "that was the name !" But after a moment, she exclaimed, in astonishment, "How do you happen to know it ?"

Mascarot raised his spectacles and gave his associate a withering glance. "Beaumarchef knows everything," he replied, carelessly. "That is his business."

This explanation was not, perhaps, altogether satisfactory to the estimable cook, but, nevertheless, she resumed her narrative. "Well,"

said she, “madame said that this Paul was a fellow of no account, that she did not trust him at all, and she and the man with the dark beard talked together about his having stolen twelve thousand francs.”

Here Mascarot pricked up his ears, and became all attention. It seemed as if his patience was to be rewarded, after all.

“Do you know the name of this man to whom your mistress said this? asked Mascarot.

“No, indeed. The others called him ‘the artist.’ ”

This vague information did not satisfy the methodical agent. “Listen, my girl,” he said, in honeyed tones, “will you do me a great service? I am inclined to believe this man is an artist who owes me money. You must obtain for me his name and address.”

“All right! you may rely on me!” she answered, hastily adding, “I must go now, for I have the breakfast to buy. To-morrow, or the day after, you shall have the address.” So saying she left the room.

As the door closed after her, Mascarot brought his hand down heavily on his desk. “Hortebize,” said he, “is wonderfully clever in sniffing out a danger. Fortunately, I have the means of suppressing both this foolish woman, this Rose, and that greater fool, the young fellow who is ruining himself for her. Ay, they must both be suppressed.”

As before, when the same verb passed his master’s lips, Beaumarchef put himself on guard.

“Pshaw! how absurd you are with your everlasting gestures,” interrupted Mascarot, shrugging his shoulders. “I can do better than that. Rose calls herself nineteen, but she is more; she is over twenty-one. She is consequently of age. Gandelu, however, is still a minor, so that if old Gandelu had a little more nerve—well, it would be moral and funny, both at the same time. Article 354 of the Penal Code is an elastic one.”

“What did you say, sir?” asked Beaumarchef, who did not understand.

“I say that before forty-eight hours have passed, I must have the most precise details respecting the character and disposition of the elder Gandelu. I must, by all means, know precisely what are his relations with his son.”

“Very well, I will set La Candèle on the track.”

“And as young Gandelu is in search of money, you had better have him introduced to our honourable friend Verminet, the manager of the Mutual Discount Society.”

“But that is M. Taine’s business, sir.”

B. Mascarot was too much pre-occupied to hear. “As to the other,” he continued, in answer to his own secret fears, “as to the tall, dark young man—this artist—I fancy that he is more intelligent than the rest of the set; but woe betide him if he crosses my path! When anybody annoys me—a gesture of terrible significance finished his half uttered sentence. Then, after a moment’s silence, he added, “Return to your duties, Beaumar; I hear people coming in.”

The man did not move, desirous as was his dismissal. “Excuse me, sir,” said he, “La Candèle is out there, and will attend to them. I have my report to make to you.”

“Quite right; well, take a seat and speak.”

This condescension, and the pleasure of speaking from a chair instead of on his feet (which seldom happened at least with Mascarot), seemed to delight Beaumarchef. “Yesterday” he began, “there was nothing new; but this morning, before I was up, there was a rap at my door. I opened it, and saw Toto-Chupin.”

"He had not lost sight of Caroline Schimel, I hope."

"Not for a moment, sir. He had even succeeded in entering into conversation with her, and they went to a *café* together."

"Good! That was well done."

"Oh! he is pretty cunning, that scamp Toto; and if he were but a trifle more honest—however, to come to the point, he pretends that if this woman drinks it is because she has something on her mind. She believes that some folks who have threatened her, dog her steps. She is so afraid of being assassinated that she does not live alone. She boards with some honest working people, and pays them well, for she has plenty of money."

Mascarot seemed much annoyed. "That's a nuisance," murmured he. "In that case one can't visit her incognito. However, where do these good people reside?"

"At the top of Montmartre, beyond the Château Rouge, in the Rue Mercadet."

"Very well. Tantaine will ascertain. Be sure that Toto makes no mistake, and does not let this woman slip through his fingers."

"There is no danger of that. He even told me that he was on the point of discovering who she really was, where she came from, and if she had any relatives, and the source of her money."

Whilst speaking, Beaumarchef pulled fiercely at his waxed moustache. This gesture indicated that he had a new idea.

"What is it now?" asked his master.

"Why, sir, simply that I should like to tell you to beware of Toto-Chupin. I have discovered that he robs us, and sells our goods below their value."

"Are you dreaming?"

"No, sir; I have had my suspicions for some time, and yesterday I found out the truth from an ill-looking fellow who came here to see Chupin, whom he called his friend."

"Very well," answered Mascarot. "I will find out the truth; and if you are correct, Master Toto shall spend some time in a House of Correction."

Beaumarchef now withdrew, but almost immediately afterwards he returned. "Patron," said he, "here is a servant from the Marquis de Croisenois with a letter."

Mascarot took no pains to conceal his ill-humor. "The marquis is in a deuce of a hurry," he exclaimed. "However, send the man here."

The new-comer made his appearance, irreproachable in garb and deportment; he plainly served in an aristocratic household. He had got himself up in the English style, with a collar as stiff as steel, which rose to his ears, and a neckcloth so tightly fastened that his smooth, shaven face was ruddy enough to suggest a rush of blood to the brain. His coat, made no doubt by a London tailor, was as stiff as if carved from wood. He was apparently of wood himself, and seemed to move under the impulsion of some skilful mechanism concealed beneath his red vest. At each turn he took, one was surprised not to hear the creaking of machinery.

"My master, sir," he said, as he handed a letter to Mascarot, "wished me to give this letter into your own hands."

While the worthy agent broke the seal, he examined this model servant attentively. He did not know him, for Croisenois did not take his servants from the office. "It would seem, my good fellow," remarked Mascarot leisurely, "that your master, contrary to his usual habits, rose with Aurora this morning."

The servant not merely refrained from smiling at the epigram, but really looked shocked. "Monsieur le Marquis," said he, "agreed to give me fifteen louis over and above my wages to gratify his fancy of calling me a good fellow. No one else has the right to do so."

"Ah ! ah ! ah !" replied the agent, in three different tones, each one more expressive than the other. "I wonder," he said to himself, "where dignity will next instal itself. If I chose to call the marquis a good fellow, he wouldn't think of resenting it."

In the meanwhile M. de Croisenois's envoy, satisfied with his little speech, returned to the duties of his mission. "I think," said he, "that Monsieur le Marquis is still asleep. He wrote this note on returning from his club."

"Are you to wait for an answer ?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well then, wait ;" and tossing the envelope aside, Mascarot read as follows : "My dear Sir,—Gambling has its ups and downs as you are aware : you will guess the remainder, no doubt. I have played at cards so unluckily to-night, that in addition to my ready money, I have lost three thousand francs on parole. I must have this money before noon ; my honour demands it."

The agent shrugged his shoulders, and muttered, loud enough for the servant, who was watching him from the corner of his eye, to hear him if he chose. "His honour ! Great heavens ! it is enough to make a man laugh. His honour, indeed !"

But not a muscle in the face of this well-drilled servant quivered. He stood as stiffly as a Prussian soldier, seeming neither to see nor hear. Mascarot therefore resumed his perusal. "Am I wrong in relying on you for this trifle ? I think not. I feel certain even that you will send me a hundred and fifty or two hundred louis in addition, for I cannot remain without a sou. And of the great affair—what news ? It is with my feet on fire that I await your decision.—Most truly yours,

"HENRI, MARQUIS DE CROISENOIS."

"And so," grumbled the agent. "A pretty game indeed. Five thousand francs on the spot, *hic et nunc*. Find them, good Mascarot; open your strong box. But, frivolous, wasteful creature, if I did not need your fine name, bequeathed to you by your ancestors, a name you daily drag through the mire—if I did not need your name, I say, you might whistle for your five thousand francs."

The unfortunate thing was that Croisenois was one of the most important cards in the game that the adventurous Mascarot was playing ; and so, despite his evident reluctance, he took from his strong box five notes of a thousand francs each.

"Do you desire a receipt ?" asked the servant.

"It is of no consequence—the letter will answer every purpose ; but wait a moment ;" and the agent, ever regardful of future emergencies, drew from his pocket a gold piece of twenty francs, and laying it on the table, said in his most engaging tone, "Take this, my friend, for your trouble !"

But the other drew back. "You will excuse me, sir, if I refuse. When I enter a gentleman's service, I ask for wages high enough to have no need of gratuities." After this dignified reply, he bowed, and, as solemn as a Quaker, retired with measured steps.

The agent was actually nonplussed. Twenty years of singular experiences had never furnished him with anything so theoretically improbable

as this. "It is absolutely incredible," he muttered. "Where the devil did Croisenois pick up this fellow? Can it be that the marquis is stronger and wiser than I have hitherto fancied?"

An inexplicable anxiety, a vague and confused presentiment, disturbed his mind. "Is it possible," he continued, "that this individual is not a real servant? I have made so many enemies in my time that they are numerous enough to form an avalanche. However skilfully I hold my cards, some one may have seen my hand." This idea made him tremble. Some schemes are so perilous, that as the decisive moment approaches everything furnishes cause for distrust and fear. Mascarot had almost grown afraid of his shadow, and his anxiety was well-nigh unbearable. However, after a moment's thought, he seemed to shake off his most oppressive fears. "No, no," he said, shaking his head, "I am a little cracked, and my brain is misty with chimerical suspicions. If there were a man skilful enough to have penetrated my plans, patient enough to assume the Croisenois livery to watch my movements with greater facility, he would certainly never have been so simple as to excite attention by such singular manners and deportment."

He said all this with the view of reassuring himself, no doubt; and yet, in reality, he was in the position of the coward who whistles in the dark in the hope of dispelling his fears. However, surely among all his expedients, among all his means of investigation, there must be some way of discovering this servant's antecedents, and he began to reflect what might be done with that object in view. He was still puzzling his brain, when Beaumarchef appeared once more on the threshold in a great state of excitement. "You here again!" exclaimed Mascarot, harshly. "Am I to have one moment's peace to-day?"

"Sir, that young fellow is here."

"Paul?"

"Yes, sir."

"At this hour? I told him to come at noon. Something must have happened to him—"

He stopped short, for the door which Beaumarchef had left ajar was at this moment fully opened by Paul Violaine. Plainly enough, something extraordinary had befallen the agent's protégé. He was deadly pale, and his eyes had the peculiar, hunted expression of an animal who has been a long time pursued. His clothes were unbrushed, and his general appearance told of a night passed in aimless wanderings. "Ah! sir—" he began.

But with an imperious gesture Mascarot imposed silence. "Leave us, Beaumar," said he; "and you, my child, sit down."

Paul seated himself, or, rather, fell on the nearest chair. "My life is finished," he murmured; "I am dishonoured—lost."

The estimable agent looked as bewildered as if he had fallen from the clouds; but, in point of fact, his great stupefaction was feigned. He knew why Paul came to him in this condition; for, like a dramatist who conducts his personages from prologue to finish, he had himself prepared the events which had so disturbed his protégé. If he was surprised, it was only at the prompt and violent effect of his combinations. With all one's experience, it is sometimes difficult, when charging a mine, to calculate the results with absolute precision. It was, however, with the air of an amiable and sympathetic listener that he drew his chair nearer, and said, "Be calm, my dear boy; have every confidence in me, and open your heart. What in the world has happened?"

Paul half rose, and in a tragic tone replied, "Rose has deserted me!"

Mascarot raised both arms to heaven. "And for this you say that your life is wrecked? Do you not realise that the future is full of promise?"

"I loved Rose, sir," answered Paul, in such a melo-dramatic style that Mascarot was tempted to smile.

"But that was not all," continued the young fellow, who made heroic but useless efforts to restrain his tears. "I am accused of an infamous robbery."

"You?" asked Mascarot, at the same time saying to himself, "Ah! now we've come to it."

"Yes, sir, I! and you are the only human being who can prove my innocence, for you alone know the truth."

"The truth?"

"Yes, sir, you can save me. Yesterday you were so very kind to me that I at once thought of you, and took the liberty of coming earlier than the time you had named, to ask your aid."

"But what can I do?"

"Everything, sir. Let me tell you the singular fatality of which I have become a victim."

Mascarot's features expressed the liveliest interest. "Go on!" said he.

"Yesterday, sir," resumed Paul, "a short time after leaving you, I went back to the Hôtel du Pérou. I hastened upstairs, and on the mantelshelf I found this letter from Rose."

He held out the letter, but Mascarot did not condescend to touch it.

"Rose, sir, tells me that she loves me no longer, and entreats me never to try and see her again. She tells me that, tired of poverty with me, she accepts a fortune that has been offered her—diamonds and a carriage."

"And that surprises you?"

"Ah! How could I anticipate such infamous treason, when only the evening before she could not find oaths enough to swear that she loved me? Why did she lie? Did she wish to make the shock greater? Gone! Ah, I fell to the floor as if felled by a hammer. On climbing the stairs, I had pictured to myself how delighted she would be to hear of all you had promised me! For more than an hour I remained in that room, almost unconscious, absorbed in the bitter thought that I should never see her again."

Mascarot watched Paul carefully, and with his usual penetration was at no loss in coming to a decision. "Your words are too profuse, my boy," he said to himself, "for your grief to be very deep or very sincere." And then aloud he asked, "But about the robbery—the accusation?"

"In a moment, sir. After awhile I decided to obey your injunctions and leave the Hôtel du Pérou, with which I was by this time more than ever disgusted."

"Naturally."

"I went down-stairs to take leave of Madame Loupias and pay her, when, sir—ah! what shame overwhelms me—as I handed her my two weeks' rent, she looked at me with the utmost contempt, and asked me where I had stolen that money."

Mascarot had some difficulty in concealing his satisfaction at the success of the little machination he had planned. "What did you say?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir, I was horrorstruck, and my tongue cleaved to my palate. Loupias approached his wife, and they both stood snarling at me. Then, after enjoying my confusion awhile, they declared they were certain that Rose and I had robbed M. Tantaine between us."

"And you made no attempt at denial, at defence?"

"I had lost my head entirely; I only realised that what had occurred justified the suspicion. The evening before Madame Loupias had asked Rose for money, and was told we had none, and had no idea where to get any. Now, you see, on the morrow I appeared in new clothes and paid my debts, while Rose had gone off some hours previously."

"It is natural that these coincidences should strike your landlord as very singular."

"The worst was that Rose had changed the five hundred franc note lent us by Father Tantaine at a grocer's shop, kept by a man named Mélusin, and it was this scoundrel who started the report about us. He even dared to say that a detective, who was charged with arresting us, had called upon him to make inquiries."

Mascarot knew all this even better than Paul, and yet he thought fit to prolong the explanation. "Come," said he, "I fail to grasp your meaning, or to understand the precise cause of your grief. Has there been a robbery committed?"

"How can I tell? I have never seen Monsieur Tantaine since that day, and he has never returned to the hotel. It is said he has been robbed, that a large sum has been stolen from him, and that, as it belonged to his employers, he is now in prison."

"Why did you not tell the truth?"

"What good would it have done? It can be proved that Monsieur Tantaine was no friend of mine, not even an acquaintance. Folks would have laughed in my face had I said, 'Last evening he came into my room, and then and there presented me with five hundred francs.'"

For a moment Mascarot looked puzzled, as if trying to solve some riddle. "Ah! I have it," he said at last, "and my theory corresponds entirely with Tantaine's character."

Paul listened as if his life depended on every word. "Tantaine," resumed Mascarot, "is the most honest man I know, and has the kindest of hearts, but he has cobwebs in his brain. He was rich once, but was ruined by his generosity. He is as poor as Job now, but he has the same longing as before to be useful."

"But—"

"Let me finish. The misfortune is, that in the place where he is employed, and which he owes to me, he has the handling of some small amount of funds. Overwhelmed with pity at the sight of your despair, he disposed of other people's property as he would have done of his own. Suddenly called upon to hand in his accounts, and finding himself face to face with a deficit, he lost courage, and declared he had been robbed. Inquiries were no doubt made. It was ascertained you and Rose had been living in the next room to him, you were seen with money you did not account for, and so suspicion was excited against you."

This was all indisputable. Paul shivered, and his brow was moist with a cold sweat. He already in imagination saw himself arrested, judged, and condemned. "However," added he, "M. Tantaine has my promissory note, which is a proof of my good faith."

"Poor child! Do you think that if he hoped to save himself by accusing you, he would venture to produce your note?"

"But, fortunately, sir, you know the truth."

Mascarot shook his head sadly. "Should I be believed?" he asked. "Justice is but a human institution, my friend—that is to say, it is sub-

ject to error. Having to choose between truth and falsehood, it can, of course, decide only by appearances. Now tell me, are not appearances against you?"

This pitiless logic seemed to crush Paul. "Then I have but one resource—I must die," he murmured, "for I cannot live dishonoured."

The combination devised by Mascarot with the view of reducing Paul Violaine to absolute subjection was of almost childish simplicity, but he had considered it sufficient, and he was right; for Paul had been so overwhelmed, that he had failed to perceive the connecting link between the extraordinary loan of the five hundred franc note and the accusation of theft founded on changing it. Easily intimidated, like all persons who are not quite sure of their ability to resist temptation, he had begun by flying from the enemy, and now he surrendered himself with bound limbs. This was precisely what Mascarot had counted on. The surgeon who decides on a perilous operation often begins by weakening his patient, and Dr. Hortelize's friend had followed this mode of treatment. He had begun by breaking such remaining vestiges of will as Paul had possessed, before proceeding to remodel him in accordance with his purposes. And indeed young Violaine now seemed utterly crushed. He lay half extended in the agent's arm-chair, inert, exhausted, imagining that suicide was the only issue to his many troubles.

The moment had come to strike the last blow. "Come, my child," said Mascarot, "you must not despair."

No answer.

Did Paul hear, or not? At all events he seemed destitute of comprehension. But Mascarot was determined that he should both hear and understand, and so, shaking him roughly by the arm, he cried, "Wake up! Rouse yourself! In your position a young fellow helps himself and shows that he's a man!"

"What's the use of struggling?" sighed Paul. "Haven't you just shown me that I could never hope to prove my innocence?"

This unmanly weakness made Mascarot very impatient, but he dissimulated. "No," he answered, "no; I have merely wished to show you the alarming side of your affairs."

"There is but one side."

"You are mistaken; I had not finished. I may be as easily mistaken. We are only supposing that Tantaine disposed of funds confided to him. Are we sure of it? Are we sure of his arrest? We merely suppose it is he who has thrown all the blame on you. Is this true? Before giving up the game in despair, would it not be as well to make certain?"

As Mascarot spoke, Paul felt himself revive. "That is true, certainly," he murmured.

"Of course it is! I have said nothing, moreover, of the influence I have over Tantaine—*influence* that I can use to make him confess the truth."

Characters like Paul's have the happy faculty of grasping at the least ray of hope, and are elevated as easily as they are depressed. A moment before he had believed himself lost, and now he considered himself rescued. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Shall I ever be able to prove to you my gratitude?"

Mascarot's face beamed with paternal kindness. "Perhaps," said he, "perhaps. And as a beginning, you must utterly forget the past. When daylight comes you drive away the night's bad dreams, don't you? Now, I wake you to a new life from this hour; make a new man of yourself."

Paul sighed. "Rose!" he murmured; "I cannot forget Rose!"

The worthy agent frowned at this name. "What!" he cried. "Do you still think of that creature? There are folks I know, who console themselves readily enough after finding out that they have been dupes and playthings; their love increases, in fact, with each new treason. If you are made of this facile clay, we shall never understand each other. Run and find your pretty, faithless mistress, throw yourself at her feet, and implore her to forgive your poverty."

Under the stroke of irony, Paul straightened himself up. "I will be revenged on her one of these days," he eagerly replied.

"That is a very easy thing to do. Forget her."

In spite of Paul's determined tone, a certain amount of hesitation was to be read in his eyes—a hesitation which was extremely displeasing to Mascarot. "Have you no ambition?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; I have."

"No, sir, you have not, or you would never think of embarrassing yourself with a woman like Rose. You should keep your arms free, my boy, if you wish to make any use of your elbows in the battle of life. What would you say of a runner who, hoping to gain the prize, fastened a cannon ball to his leg? You would of course say, 'He is mad!' Very well, that is precisely your condition."

"I will follow your advice, sir," said Paul, this time without an afterthought.

"That's proper speaking. Believe me, the day is not far off when you will thank heaven for inspiring Rose with the idea and the means of deserting you. You can easily climb higher!"

For thirty years Mascarot had speculated on human passions and weaknesses; he understood men thoroughly. With ten words he had gained a decisive influence over Paul.

"Then, sir," the young fellow began, "this situation at twelve thousand francs a year—"

"There has never been any such situation, my friend."

Paul turned deadly pale. He saw himself sent away penniless, reduced once more to live in some hole like the Hôtel du Pérou, and this time alone. "But sir," he stammered, "you allowed me to hope for—"

"What! twelve thousand francs? Be easy. You shall have that, and more; but you will remain with me. I am growing old, I have no family, and you shall be my son."

At this proposition, Paul's brow grew dark. The idea that his life would be passed in this office was revolting to him; the thought of answering the questions and inscribing the names of the numerous applicants was humiliating to his vanity.

Mascarot read this impression with perfect ease, from behind his spectacles. "And the fool is without bread and butter. Ah!" he mused, "if it were not for Flavia—if it were not for the Champdoce affair!" Then, aloud, he resumed, "Do not imagine, my dear child, that I wish to condemn you to the hard unpleasant labours of an employment agent. By no means, I have other views for you, far more worthy of your merits. You please me, and I promise myself the very great pleasure of realizing your ambitious dreams. To carry out my plans, you have every requisite, save those which are generally lacking in young people—prudence and steadiness of purpose. Ah, well, I must be prudent and steady for you." He paused for a moment, as if to impart additional weight to his words,

and then added, "I was thinking much of you yesterday, and I planned in my mind the edifice of your future. He is poor, I said to myself; and this, at his age, with his tastes and ideas, is cruel. But why shouldn't I marry him to one of those heiresses who bring a million or two in their aprons to the man who touches their hearts?"

"Alas!"

"Why 'alas!' pray? Are you still thinking of Rose?"

"By no means. I merely wished to say—"

"When I speak to you of heiresses, it is because I already know of one, and my friend Dr. Hortebize would soon introduce you to her. Rose is pretty, but she is nearly as pretty as Rose, and is, besides, well born, well educated, and clever. She has distinguished family connections, and if her husband were a man of talent—a poet, or composer—he might easily rise to any position."

Paul's face flushed. He had himself often fancied all this, in days long past.

"Knowing your illegitimate birth," continued Mascarot, "I wove the most beautiful romance for you. Before '93, you know, every bastard was regarded as a gentleman, for the very good reason that he did not know who his father might be. Who can say that your's does not bear one of the grandest names in France, and is not possessed of untold wealth? Perhaps at this very moment he is searching for you to give to you his fortune and his name. Would you like to be a duke?"

"Sir," stammered Paul, "sir—"

B. Mascarot burst out laughing. "As yet," said he, "we are only talking of suppositions and wishes."

The young man did not know what to think. "Then what do you wish me to do, sir?" he asked.

The agent grew very serious. "I wish and claim absolute obedience," he replied—"an obedience at once prompt and unreasoning, that asks no questions and makes no comments."

"I will obey you, sir, but I implore you not to trifle with me."

Instead of making any reply; Mascarot rang his bell for Beaumarchef, who promptly appeared. "I leave you alone," he said; "I am going to Van Klopen's." Then, turning towards Paul, he added, "I never trifle, and to-day you shall have the proof of my assertion. Now, we will go to a restaurant to breakfast; I wish to talk with you, and afterwards—" he paused, the better to enjoy Paul's surprise, and then added—"afterwards I will show you the young girl I intend for you. To begin with, I am anxious to know if she pleases you."

XI.

YOUNG Gaston de Gandelu, the model of Parisian chivalry, had excellent reasons to be astonished on finding that André, a *genre* painter, was ignorant even of the very existence of M. Van Klopen; for the reputation of this extraordinary man has travelled through Europe. One may convince oneself of this by glancing at his bills, decorated with engravings of innumerable medals gained at International Exhibitions. On one side may be read the words, "Under the High Patronage of Her Catholic Majesty the Queen of All the Spains," and on the other. "By Special Appointment to the courts of Russia, Denmark, and Sweden" Van Klopen was not an Alsatian, as Gandelu, who, perhaps, regarded Germany as a province

of Alsace, had said. No, Van Klopen was a genuine Dutchman. In 1850 this intelligent man, established as a tailor in his native town, cut from cloth purchased on credit the long vests and monumental coats which impart such dignity to the petty burgomasters of Holland. Van Klopen was not successful, and in short, having failed, was obliged to abscond from his creditors. He took refuge in Paris, that centre of feverish competition, and seemed destined to die of hunger there. But something very different happened.

One fine morning he rented, for twenty-six thousand francs a year, a superb apartment in the Rue de Gramont, and installed on each side of the doorway of the house a marble slab, bearing the inscription :—

VAN KLOPEN.

LADIES' TAILOR.

He published innumerable "puffs" in all the most widely circulated newspapers, declaring himself to be the "Regenerator of Fashion," the "Sovereign Pontiff of Feminine Elegance," and the "Tailor of the Queens of Europe." These ideas could never have originated in the brain of the stout Hollander. And, moreover, whence came his funds? On this point he was silent. At first the enterprise was by no means a success. For a month and more, Paris held its sides laughing at the boundless pretensions of this "Regenerator of Fashion, from Rotterdam." But Van Klopen let the Parisians laugh, bowing his head under the storm he had aroused. He was quite right. His advertisements at last brought him two customers, who soon trumpeted his fame.

One was a very great lady, even more adventurous and eccentric than she was noble, the Duchess de Sairmeuse. The other was no less distinguished in her way, being a celebrity of the *demi-monde* —in fact, Jenny Fancy, then living under the protection of the Comte de Trémorel; and for these two, Van Klopen composed toilettes which far surpassed anything that had ever been worn or dreamed of before. From this moment he was launched. Success came to him as it always comes in Paris—complete, astonishing overwhelming, so to say. One curious point was that every lady's maid in Paris sang his praises to her mistress. At last, his reputation became world wide, and defied the assaults of every rival. He even had to refuse orders, being assailed on every side. "I must choose my customers," he said, loftily, and he did choose them, weeding out all those whom he thought would not add to his reputation. So thus, the noblest and the wealthiest dames in Paris disputed the honour of being dressed by him.

The proudest women submitted to his scrutiny, and confided secrets to him they dared not acknowledge to their husbands, enduring, moreover, with perfect equanimity, the touch of his big coarse hands on their shoulders as he took their measures.

It was the fashion! His *salons* were neutral ground, so to say, where women of very different classes met, jostled, and examined each other. Madame la Duchesse de R—— was delighted to be able to have a good stare at the notorious Mademoiselle Bischy, for whom the Baron de N—— had blown out the small amount of brains he possessed. In employing the same dressmaker, her grace perhaps hoped to acquire some of this creature's power of fascination. On her side, Mademoiselle Diamant, the actress, whose salary at the Délassements Comiques, as was generally known, merely amounted to some hundred crowns a year, was overjoyed to crush, by the extravagance of her orders, all the belles of society assembled in Van

Klopen's salon. Between these various customers, the cunning ladies' tailor dispensed his favours with remarkable impartiality and tact; and thus he was held as the dearest and best of men. How many times had he not heard lovely lips exclaim, "Remember, Klopen, if I don't have my dress for Tuesday, I shall die!"

In winter, in the "ball" season, a procession of carriages formed in the street in front of his establishment. Between nine o'clock and midnight, two hundred fair beings besieged his house, anxious that the last pin should be fixed by the master's hand, and eager for his approving smile. He passed the brilliant throng in review, coldly, impassively, often with a cigar between his teeth; but then he might take almost any liberty with impunity. Praise fell but seldom from his lips. He knew that "Very good" spoken by him thrilled the elect and maddened a score of rivals. The more or less fragile ties of vanity were not, however, the only bonds he employed to enslave his customers. Whenever his inquiries were satisfactory, he offered credit, and, in addition, he often lent his customers money. In these days of reckless expenditure, no wonder that the ladies' tailor should have become the horror of husbands. Poor husbands! They slumbered peacefully, admiring their wives' order, economy, and good management; but suddenly—ah! what a bitter awakening—the phlegmatic Dutchman stepped on the scene with a little bill for twenty thousand francs. What could be done except to pay? Yes pay or plead; for Van Klopen pleaded—on one occasion summoning the brilliant Marchioness de Reversay before the courts, and on another suing the adventuress Chinchette, the actress, the same who, as you may remember, came to such a sad end. Well might husbands and fathers dread this usurer in silk and velvet. Woe to the woman who allowed herself to be inveigled in the snares of his system. The woman who owed him a thousand crowns was lost, for she could never say to what depths of degradation she might be compelled to descend to obtain the money to pay him. And yet there were even old and honourable names on his books!

It was not surprising that so much prosperity should have turned Van Klopen's head. He was stout and rosy, impudent, vain, and cynical. His flatterers pretended he was witty. Such, then, was the man on whom Mascarot and his protégé called, after a bountiful luncheon at Philippe's. Van Klopen's establishment needs a word of mention. A superb carpet, put down at his expense, covered the stairs to his own door on the first floor. In the ante-room, two footmen in full livery, gorgeous in gold lace, were seated at the large ornamental stove. On perceiving Mascarot's entrance they rose respectfully, and one of them hastened to anticipate what would naturally be the visitor's first question. "Monsieur Van Klopen," said he, "is engaged with Madame la Princesse Korasof, but when he is informed who wishes to see him, he will free himself. Will you kindly take the trouble to go to my master's private room?"

"Oh! we are in no haste," replied Mascarot; "we will wait in the salon with the customers. Are there many people there?"

"About a dozen ladies, sir."

"Very well! They will amuse me."

And without waiting for a rejoinder, Mascarot opened one side of a folding door and pushed Paul into a vast apartment profusely gilded and ornamented in the worst possible taste, but distinguished by one extraordinary feature. The wall paper was almost entirely concealed by a prodigious number of little water-colour sketches, representing women in every imagin-

able kind of toilette. Each sketch had its inscription, such as, "Toilette of Madame de C—— for a dinner at the Russian Embassy." "State robes for the Arch-duchess W—— of Austria." "Ball dress for the Marchioness de V——." "Négligée for Mademoiselle S—— B——." "Seaside costume for Madame H—— de R—— at Trouville." "Confirmation dress for Mademoiselle D——." It was Van Klopen himself who had devised this means of bequeathing his conceptions to posterity.

Such as the salon was, it nevertheless astonished Paul by its brilliancy of colour and profusion of gilding, and, somewhat abashed, he lingered on the threshold—indeed, not daring to advance, since he perceived no unoccupied chair to sit down upon. But Mascarot's coolness was enough for both. Catching his protégé by the arm, he drew him to a sofa, whispering in his ear, "Look out! the heiress is here."

Men so seldom entered this feminine sanctuary, where a dozen élégantes patiently awaited the good pleasure of Fashion's sovereign, that the appearance of B. Mascarot and Paul Violaine positively created a sensation—a sensation all the greater on account of Paul's good looks, which were really enhanced by his air of bashful timidity. The buzz of conversation suddenly ceased, and under the fire of twelve pair of eyes, Paul felt his cheeks burn, and began to play with his hat, like a peasant before a magistrate, not daring even to raise his eyes. His confusion by no means suited Mascarot. He had brought his protégé there for a purpose, and he wished him to look about the room. He himself was by no means intimidated by this brilliant throng. As he entered, he bowed all round, with the superannuated graces of a dandy of 1820, and now, seated on the sofa, he seemed as much at his ease as in his own office, in the midst of his cooks and footmen. His imperturbable assurance was due, it must be admitted, to his profound contempt for human nature, and still more to his spectacles. If people only knew how useful coloured glasses are in concealing inner emotions, they would be worn by the entire universe. However, considerably enough, the worthy agent desired that his protégé should have a few minutes to recover himself, and grow accustomed to the heavy, perfumed atmosphere of the salon; but finally, seeing that Paul still kept his eyes cast down, he touched him lightly on the arm. "Is this the first time," he whispered, "that you ever saw ladies in grand toilette—are you afraid of them?"

Paul made an effort to show a bold front.

"Look to the right," continued Mascarot. "Between the window and the piano—there she is!"

Near the window, with her maid standing beside her, sat a young girl, apparently not more than eighteen years old. She was not, perhaps, as pretty as Mascarot had said, but there was something very striking in her face—a singular expression that struck an observer at the first glance. She was slender, frail, and delicate looking, and very dark. Her features lacked regularity, but her black hair was wonderfully glossy and abundant, and her eyes of a dark blue tinge were full of tenderness. The purple of her lips bespoke a sanguine temperament, and her bossy forehead indicated remarkable obstinacy to the phrenologist. Everything about her spoke of passion; or, rather, she seemed the incarnation of passion itself.

Paul's eyes were irresistibly drawn to the corner of the room where she sat. Their glances met, and both started at the same moment as if they had received a shock from the same electric battery. Paul remained motionless, absolutely fascinated; while as for the young girl, so great was her

emotion that she turned suddenly aside, fearing to be remarked. But no one heeded her.

Conversation had been resumed, and all the other customers were listening with admiration to a lady who was describing, in the most affected manner, one of the last toilettes she had worn in the Bois. "It was wonderful!" she said; "and only Van Kloepen could have created anything so exquisite. All those women in open victorias were simply furious, and the Marquis de Croisenois told me that Jenny Fancy absolutely wept with rage. Just imagine three green skirts of different shades, each of them cut and looped—"

But the excellent Mascarot cared little for this description. He had watched Paul and the young girl, and a smile now curved his withered lips. "Well?" said he to his protégé.

Paul could hardly restrain himself, as he murmured, "She is adorable!"

"And a millionaire," insisted Mascarot.

"Oh, if she hadn't a penny, any man might fall down and worship her!"

Mascarot coughed slightly, and arranged his spectacles. "Now," he thought, "I have you, my boy! Whether your emotion be feigned or real—whether you adore the girl or her dowry—is all the same. You will be governed by me." With this paternal reflection he again leaned towards his protégé. "Have you no desire to hear her name?"

"Tell me, I beg you."

"Flavia!"

Paul was in ecstacies. He had now the requisite courage to look at the girl deliberately; she had turned away, and he thought, forgetting the numerous reflections in the various mirrors, that she could not see him.

In the meanwhile, the lady who had created such a sensation with her green dress was rambling on. "Have you heard," she asked, "what has happened to the poor Countess de Luxé. It is really dreadful! I am so sorry for her, for she's a perfect angel. Would you believe it? She had her dresses cleaned and dyed, and economized in every way, and all the time her husband was squandering money on an actress. When she heard of it, she nearly died of grief; and I swore to myself, that if my husband was ever ruined, it should be by me and not by any one else."

She stopped short, for at this moment the door was thrown noisily open, and Van Kloepen appeared in all his glory. He was only five feet four in height, and almost as broad. His red face indicated considerable partiality for the bottle, his expression was thoroughly insolent, and he spoke with the strong accent of a citizen of Rotterdam. As usual, he wore a dressing-gown of garnet-coloured velvet with a lace frill and ruffles; and several diamond rings adorned his fingers. "Whose turn is it?" he asked abruptly.

It was precisely the turn of the talkative lady, and she was already rising, when the tailor peremptorily stopped her. He had just caught a glimpse of Mascarot, and hastened to greet him with marked cordiality. "Is it you," he exclaimed "whom I have so long kept waiting? Excuse me, pray."

There was a murmur round the room—but a very, very faint one.

"Please come into my private room," resumed Van Kloepen. "Ah! this gentleman is with you? Very good. Walk in, gentlemen, walk in."

As he spoke, he all but pushed Mascarot and Paul before him; and he was about to retire from the salon without a word of apology, when one of the ladies started forward, and as he retreated into a lobby outside, cleverly joined him, closing the door behind her. "One word, sir," she said; "one word in heaven's name."

Van Klopen looked at her with an air of annoyance. "What's the matter now?" he asked, impatiently.

"Why, sir, to-morrow my note of 3,000 francs is due."

"Very possibly."

"And I have no money to meet it!"

"Nor have I."

"However, I have come to entreat you to renew it for two months, sir; only two months. One month even, on whatever conditions you may choose."

The ladies' tailor shrugged his shoulder. "In two months," he said, "you will be no better able to pay than to-day. If the note is not paid to-morrow it will be protested."

"Good heavens! And then my husband will know!"

"Precisely. I wish him to know, for it is to him I must look for payment!"

The unhappy woman turned deadly pale. "Yes," she said, "my husband will pay; but I am ruined."

"I can't help it. I have partners who insist."

"Ah! don't tell me that, sir, I implore you. Save me. My husband has paid my debts three times, and he swore—ah! you don't know what an oath he took! I have children, sir. He is quite capable of taking them away from me. For pity's sake, dear Mr. Van Klopen—"

She wrung her hands and sobbed. She was almost on her knees, but the illustrious man milliner was still impassively frigid. "When a woman is the mother of a family," said he, "she should take a dressmaker by the day. There are some who really make charming dresses."

She still tried to move him. She snatched his hands and seemed ready to press them to her lips. "If you only knew," she sobbed. "I shall never dare go home. I shall never have the courage to tell my husband."

Van Klopen gave an insolent laugh. "Ah! well," said he, "if you are afraid of your own husband, try some other woman's!" and disengaging himself roughly, and abandoning the unhappy woman in the lobby, he hurried into his consulting room, where Paul and Mascarot were waiting for him. The *arbiter elegantarium* had plainly lost his temper, for he banged the door behind him, with unusual violence. "Did you hear that conversation?" he asked Mascarot. "Scenes of this kind occur every now and then, and are by no means pleasant." He paused, glanced inquisitively at the right hand, wiped it, and added with a sneer, "Why, she actually shed tears on my hand."

Paul looked on in disgust. The first impulses of his heart were still good. If that moment, he had been the happy owner of three thousand francs, he would certainly have taken them to this poor woman, whose sobs he still heard in the lobby. "It is frightful!" he said.

His remark seemed to scandalize the tailor, who, in a cynical tone rejoined, "Ah, my dear sir, you attach too much importance to these hysterical attacks. If you were in my place, you would soon learn what they amount to. After all, I have to defend my money and my partners. You don't know, perhaps, that all these pretty creatures whom I dress, are mad with vanity, and care for nothing but their toilettes. Father, mother and husband—they would give them all, with their children thrown in, to open an account with me. You don't know what a woman is capable of in order to procure a new dress, to crush some rival with. It is only when the day of settlement comes that they think or talk of their families."

"Yes; but you know that with this lady you run no risk. Her husband—"

"Ah! yes; her husband," cried Van Klopen, warming up. "Husbands amuse me very much! If you happen to see them when you go with patterns to their houses, they are dreadfully civil and complimentary, for they like fine clothes worn in their honour. But when the bill is presented, it is quite another matter. They roll their eyes, and talk of pitching you out of the window."

Despite this rejoinder, and with the best faith in the world, Paul went on pleading the cause of the poor woman outside. "But husbands are often deceived," said he.

"That's rubbish. They know well enough. At all events in their position they ought to take their precautions. But no; they find it pleasanter to feign ignorance. When they have given their wives a hundred louis per month, they look on themselves as free, and pretend not to be surprised at all the gorgeous dresses their wives wear. Now, common sense should tell them that their wives must get the dresses on credit. To tell the truth, they know what they are about. Madame begins by opening an account, and by-and-bye monsieur disputes the bill, and insists on a reduction. I know the game."

The tailor seemed so angry, that Mascarot concluded that his intervention was advisable. "I think that you have been a little hard," he said.

Van Klopen gave him a significant glance. "Pshaw!" he replied, "I shall be paid to-morrow—I know who'll pay me, too. Then I shall receive another order, and the whole farce will be acted over again. I had my reasons for answering as I did."

These reasons were perhaps not such as would bear the light of day, for he did not give them aloud, but drew Mascarot into a recess, where the pair whispered together, laughing heartily at intervals, as if at some capital joke. Not wishing to be taxed with indiscretion, Paul proceeded to examine the consulting room, as Van Klopen called it. He saw no writing materials, but innumerable scissors, yard sticks, and measures, quantities of samples of stuffs, and piles of water-colour sketches; while at the further end stood six forms, clothed in paper patterns—patterns of the newest creations of this master mind. Paul had just examined the last of these, when the two friends, as he supposed them to be, returned to the fireside.

"We are losing our time," said Mascarot. "I intended to glance over our books, but there are too many persons waiting for you in the salon."

"And that prevents you?" rejoined the tailor, carelessly. "Wait a moment." He disappeared, and almost immediately afterwards could be heard saying, "I am very sorry, ladies, very sorry, on my honour; but I am much occupied with a silk merchant. You understand that it is all in your interest—entirely so—unfortunately I may be some time."

"We will wait," replied the patient customers in chorus.

Van Klopen returned to his consulting room, with a look of triumph on his face. "It's no harder than that," said he. "They would remain here till night time on the chance of speaking with their little Klopen. Poor little fools! Ah! they are true Parisians. You may run after them with civilities, and they will scamper away. But if, on the contrary, you laugh at them and insult them, they will literally worship you. If ever my reputation shows signs of decline, I shall simply shut up, nail a card on the

door, with the inscription, ‘The public is not admitted here,’ and on the morrow there’ll be a perfect crowd craving audience.”

Mascarot nodded approval, while the tailor drew a huge ledger from a drawer.

“Business has never been better,” resumed Van Klopen. “In the last nine days we have had orders amounting to 87,000 francs.”

“That’s good ; but let us see about the doubtful affairs. I’m in a hurry.”

The High Pontiff of fashion turned over the leaves of his book. “Here we are,” said he. “Since February 14th, Mademoiselle Virginie Cluche has ordered five evening toilettes, two dominoes, and three visiting costumes.”

“That is a great deal !”

“That’s why I wish to consult you. She only owes a comparative trifle —one or two thousand francs.”

“Too much though, if it be true, as I hear, that her protector is ruined. Don’t refuse, but avoid taking any new orders.”

Van Klopen’s only answer was to inscribe various cabalistic letters on the margin of his book.

“On the 6th of the same month the Comtesse de Müssidan sends an important order—important for herself, I mean. Also a plain dress for her daughter. Her account has become very heavy. The count does not pay ; in fact, he warned me that he wouldn’t.”

“No matter, go on. You may even offer her more credit.”

Another marginal note.

“On the 7th a new client opened an account. Mademoiselle Flavia Martin Regal, the daughter of the banker, no doubt.”

At this name Paul started, but the worthy agent did not seem to notice his protégé’s perturbation. “My dear fellow,” said he addressing Van Klopen, “keep that young lady’s name carefully in mind. No matter what she asks for, were it even your whole house, grant it at once ; and, remember, the most absolute deference. The least levity of manner might cause trouble. She is now in the salon ; let her come here as soon as we have gone.”

By Van Klopen’s look of astonishment, Paul judged that Mascarot was not given to this kind of recommendation. “You shall be obeyed,” answered the ladies’ tailor, and he turned once more to his ledger. “On the 8th, a young gentleman, named Gaston de Gandelu, was presented here by Monsieur Luper the jeweller. His father is very rich, it is said, and he himself will receive a considerable sum when he reaches his majority, which is near at hand. He asks for a credit of fifteen or twenty thousand francs for a person he is protecting.”

The agent repressed a smile, and looked steadily at Paul through his spectacles ; but the young fellow evinced no surprise or emotion. This name of Gandelu told him nothing.

“The young woman,” continued the tailor, “came in person yesterday. She calls herself Zora de Chantemille. The fact is, she is outrageously pretty.”

Mascarot reflected for a few moments.

“You can’t imagine,” he said at last, “how that young Gandelu worries me. I would give something to find a means of getting him out of Paris.”

Van Klopen’s face became deeply suffused. The least effort at reflection, sending his blood to his brain, always produced this effect. “Ah !” said he, striking his brow, “that is easily settled. Gandelu is capable of any folly for that girl’s sake.”

"So I think."

"Then it is all fair sailing. I will open a little account with him ; he will give an order. I shall experiment, cut out, try on, and then, just before delivering the goods, I will pretend to be somewhat doubtful, and ask for two or three little notes of hand, with two signatures, you understand, and promising not to negotiate them. Then we will put the youth in communication with the Mutual Discount Society ; and our good friend, Verminet, will easily persuade him to write a well-known name at the bottom of a piece of paper. He will bring these notes to me. I shall accept them, and then we shall have him safe ! "

"A little forgery, eh ? It is not quite what I would select."

"I see no other way, however, unless—" Van Klopen paused ; for an unusual commotion, a noise of voices raised in contention, could be heard in the ante-room. The tailor seemed half annoyed, half afraid, and, rising to his feet, listened with eager attention. "I should extremely like to know," he said, "who this impudent fellow is who is making a scene here. It is, of course, some preposterous husband."

If husbands hated and feared the ladies' tailor, the latter returned the compliment, for they were the bugbears of his existence. If heed had been paid to his views, the institution of matrimony would have been at once abolished.

"Go and see what it is," advised Mascarot.

"I ! What ! Commit myself with I know not whom ! I am not quite so silly. I pay my servants to take such annoyances off my shoulders."

This was most wise and prudent. In another moment the noise decreased. The salon door was opened and shut again, and then all was still once more.

"Now let us return to our affairs," resumed the amiable Mascarot.

"Everything considered, I approve of your proposal respecting young Gandelu. I had another idea, but no matter. A little forgery may readily be made use of like a loaded pistol." So saying he left his chair, and walked with Van Klopen to the other end of the room.

After all that had been said aloud, what need could there be for this edifying couple to whisper in secret ? As their conversation had proceeded, Paul had grown paler and paler. Ignorant as he was of life, he could not fail to comprehend the purport of what he had heard. Already at Philippe's, during breakfast, Mascarot had allowed him to infer that strange things were going on around him ; and since then, he had been still further enlightened. It was evident to him that this man, whose protection he had so singularly accepted, was engaged in some dark and disgraceful intrigue. All his acts and words had a fixed meaning, and tended to the same mysterious end. Analyzing what he had seen, heard, or surmised, Paul instinctively divined a dark, foul plot. He divined that there was some connection between Caroline Schimel, the cook, who was so strictly watched, and the Marquis de Croisenois, at once so haughty and humble ; between these two and the Countess de Mussidan, who was being driven along the road to ruin. And, moreover, Flavie, the heiress, whose hand was held out to him as a rich prize, and Gaston de Gandelu, who was to be induced to commit a crime, the consequences of which would be the galleys, were also plainly connected with the same intrigue.

And was he, Paul, to be a mere instrument in Mascarot's hands ? What abyss was he being led to, what mire must he cross ? This obscure employment agent and this distinguished tailor were not two friends, as he had at first supposed, but two accomplices. He realised from what sources

Mascarot derived his power, and divined how it was that he personated remorse and vengeance, pursuing his terrified victims whip in hand. And Paul realised also that he himself now belonged to this mealy-mouthed tyrant. Too late did he awaken to a sense of connivance between Mascarot and Tantine. Too late, indeed. Although absolutely innocent, he had been so cunningly accused of theft, that his guilt seemed certain. He had trusted Mascarot and confided in him, and the agent had bound him hand and foot, irremediably enslaved him, before he was conscious of the truth—displaying, indeed, as much cunning as the huge, nocturnal, forest spiders who surprise the roosting birds and envelope them in their webs without awaking them. Could he struggle with any chance of success? No; at the least effort to break this fatal net he would be pulverised. This conviction filled him with dread; but he did not feel the noble horror of honesty for crime. To say the truth, all the bad instincts and passions hitherto dormant within him, were now fermenting like garbage in the heat of a mid-day sun.

He was still dazzled by the splendid hopes the tempter had held before his eyes. He remembered he had been told that his father was a great lord, and he thought of the young heiress, one glance from whose dark eyes had made him quiver with very passion. He said to himself that a man like Mascarot, of such great power, setting at scorn all laws and prejudices, strong and patient withal, was bound in the long run to achieve his ends. "What danger should I incur, then?" Paul asked himself, "if I altogether abandoned myself to the torrent which has already swept me away? None whatever; for Mascarot is strong enough to keep my head, as well as his own, above water."

Paul had no idea that each fleeting emotion that swept over his mobile countenance was noted and carefully analyzed by the astute Mascarot. It was by no accident that he had allowed this infamous conversation to take place in the presence of his protégé; he had decided that morning that, if he were to utilize Paul at all, the young man's timid nature must at once be brought face to face with these atrocious combinations. He had often noticed that the most subtle theories do not achieve a work of demoralization as readily as a number of broad facts abruptly stated. He read in the wavering of Paul's eyes his willingness to yield, and it was with the absolute certainty of his influence that he at last resumed his conversation with the tailor aloud. "Now," he said, "for the postscript—the serious part of my visit. Where do we stand now, with the Viscountess de Bois d'Ardon?"

Van Klopen shrugged his shoulders. "Well enough!" he answered. "I have just sent her several most extravagant toilettes."

"What does she owe?"

"About twenty-five thousand francs. She has owed us much more."

B. Mascarot fingered his spectacles as if he were enraged. "Upon my word," said he, "she is really a slandered woman. She is frivolous and coquettish, but nothing more. For a fortnight I have been diligently seeking for information about her, and I can't lay my finger on the slightest venial sin which can give us a hold on her. Fortunately, the debt does that to a certain extent. Does her husband know that she has an account here?"

"He! Of course not! He gives his wife any amount of money. And if he imagined—"

"Very well, then, that is all right; we will first send him the bill."

"But, my dear sir," urged Van Klopen, in astonishment, "she paid us last week a large sum on account!"

"All the greater reason for activity at once; she must be low in funds!"

The arbiter of fashion had a thousand objections to bring forward, but an imperious gesture from Mascarot closed his lips. "Listen to me," said the agent, haughtily. "Remember what I say, and do me the favour to dispense with all remarks."

Van Klopen had lost the air of arrogance which he displayed in dealing with his fair customers.

"Are you known by Madame de Bois d'Ardon's servants?"

"I should think I was."

"Very well, then; the day after to-morrow, precisely at three o'clock, neither earlier nor later, you will call upon the viscountess. Her servants will say that she is engaged with a visitor."

"I will wait, then."

"By no means. You will insist on seeing the lady at once, and you will find the viscountess in conversation with the Marquis de Croisenois. You know him, I suppose?"

"Only by sight."

"That's enough. Don't trouble yourself about him, but draw your bill from your pocket, and, as roughly as possible, insist on immediate payment."

"What on earth are you thinking of? The viscountess will order me to be thrown out of the window."

"That is quite possible. But you must, nevertheless, threaten to carry your bill to her husband. She will order you to leave the house, but, instead of obeying her, you must seat yourself insolently, and declare you won't budge until you have the money."

"But that's atrocious conduct."

"I quite agree with you. However, the Marquis de Croisenois will put an end to the scene. He will throw a pocket-book in your face, and say, 'Pay yourself, scoundrel!'"

"And then I am to slink off?"

"Yes; but having armed yourself previously with a well-sharpened pencil, you will give a receipt in this form: 'Received from the Marquis de Croisenois, so much, in payment of Madame de Bois d'Ardon's account.'"

Never did a man look so bewildered and humiliated as the all-powerful Van Klopen. "If I could only understand," he murmured.

"That is of no consequence now—obedience is the essential point."

"I will obey, of course; but you understand that we shall lose, not only the viscountess's custom, but also that of all her friends."

"Well? What of that?"

Van Klopen was about to rejoin, when the same angry voice, which a short time before had resounded in the ante-room, was again heard; this time, however, in the lobby adjoining the consulting chamber. "It is outrageous!" cried the intruder. "I have been waiting an hour! Where is my sword? What, ho! lacqueys, come hither! Van Klopen engaged, is he? Go and tell him that I must see him at once. When he knows who it is, he'll free himself to attend to me."

These exclamations dispelled, as by enchantment, the clouds that darkened the brows of the two accomplices. They glanced keenly at each other, as if they both recognized this sharp, falsetto voice. "It is he!" whispered Mascarot.

At the same moment the door was flung open, and in burst young Gaston de Ganelu. He wore, that day, even a shorter coat than usual,

tigher and brighter trousers, a higher shirt-collar, and a more start ing necktie. His face was red, and swollen with anger. "It is I!" he ex-claimed. "Ah! you can't stomach it, can't you! I'm like that you know; a good fellow, but straightforward—to the point,' as Achille at Vachette's says. Wait more than twenty minutes! I? Oh, no. You won't catch me at it."

This intrusion, so out of keeping with the rules of the house, almost convulsed Van Klopen with rage; but then Mascarot was present, and had given him orders to ensure young Gandelu. Now the tailor knew that ill's cannot be caught with vinegar; and so, with an all but superhuman effort at self-control, he prepared to receive the intruder with perfect courtesy. "Believe me, sir," he began, "that, had I known—"

These few words delighted the brilliant youth. "I accept your apologies," he replied, "I shan't need my sword. However, don't let us have this again. My horses are standing at your door, and have probably taken cold. You know my horses, I think! Magnificent creatures are they not? To think that Zora preferred waiting! She's in the salon now! Ah, she's very young, but I'll style her, you shall see. One minute, I'll fetch her." So saying, he ran to the lobby crying, "Zora! Madame de Chantemille! Dear viscountess!"

The great tailor seemed as much at his ease as a man on red-hot coals What a disgrace to his establishment! He cast a despairing glance at Mascarot, who was standing near the door, but the agent retained an im-passive attitude. As for Paul, he was inclined to take this young gentle-man, whose carriage was waiting at the door, for a refined specimen of the graces and culture of the fashionable world, and his heart ached as he thought of what was about to befall this interesting being. He indeed felt so strongly on the point, that he approached Mascarot and asked him in a whisper, "Is there no way of sparing this poor fellow?"

Mascarot smiled one of those sinister smiles which always sent a cold chill to the hearts of those who knew him and his ways. "Before a quarter of an hour has elapsed," said he, "I will ask you this same ques-tion, leaving you to decide the point as you please!"

"In that case—"

"Hush! This is your first real test. If you are not as strong a man as I believed—good-bye. Stand steady; a thunderbolt is about to pass over your head!"

These words were trivial enough—they might mean much or little; but the tone in which they were spoken was so expressive that Paul was startled, and gathered himself together. It was as well he did so; for with some trouble he was able to stifle an exclamation of surprise and rage at sight of the woman who now entered the room. The Viscountess, young Gandelu's Zora, was his, Paul's Rose—Rose clad in a toilette which, although purchased ready made, was none the less dazzling.

She was evidently growing accustomed to her new station; and advised by her intelligent lover, would soon win a reputation for eccentricity. In proof of this she wore on her nose a pair of glasses, which she had some difficulty in keeping in position.

However, she was still somewhat intimidated, and M. de Gandelu had almost to drag her along. "How absurd!" he cried. "What are you afraid of? Come on! Klopen is only angry that we have been kept wait-ing by his lacqueys."

As soon as Zora-Rose was installed in an arm-chair, the interesting youth

turned towards the celebrated tailor. "Well," he asked, "have you decided on a toilette that will do justice to madame's beauty?"

Van Klopen did not at once reply. With his knitted brow and eyes fixed on vacancy, he looked like Tiresias seated on the tripod, awaiting inspiration. "I have it!" he cried, at last, waving his hand majestically; "I see it before me!"

"Ah!" said Gaston, much impressed, "what a man!"

"Listen," continued the tailor, whose eyes sparkled with the fire of creative genius. "Walking costume, to begin with; a polonaise, frogged *& la pensionnaire*; body, sleeves, and underskirt of full coloured maroon. Upper skirt of the *Cheveux de la Reine* tint, slashed in oval fashion. Paniers of course—"

He might have gone on speaking for an hour, Zora-Rose heard not one word. She had just caught sight of Paul; and despite her new born audacity, her terror was so great that she nearly fainted. What would come of this unexpected meeting? How could Paul remain there motionless, when she, who knew him so well, read the most savage threats in his eyes.

Her own emotion was so evident, that finally young Gandelu perceived it; but not knowing Paul, indeed, hardly noticing his presence in the room, and especially not being quick-witted, he was entirely deceived as to the cause. "Stop!" he exclaimed; "stop, Van Klopen! she is overcome with joy. I am ready to bet you ten louis that she is about to go into hysterics!"

During this scene Mascarot had kept his protégé well in sight; but now seeing him all primed for an explosion, he considered it would be absurd and unwise to prolong the trial. "I leave you," he said, turning to Van Klopen; "don't forget our arrangements. Madame, gentlemen, good afternoon."

Knowing how to leave the house without passing through the salon, he took Paul's arm and dragged him away. It was quite time that he did so.

It was only when they reached the stairs, and were out of hearing that the worthy agent breathed freely again. "Well, what do you think now?" he asked.

So painful had been Paul's self imposed restraint, so great his agony of wounded vanity, that his teeth were ground together, and he could only answer with a groan. "The deuce," thought Mascarot, "he takes it harder than I expected. No matter! The fresh air will bring him to again."

This was not the case, however; for, on reaching the street, Paul felt his limbs fail him, and was obliged to lean on Mascarot for support. The agent was sorely perplexed, when he espied a little café hard by. "Let us go in there," said he. "You must drink something to revive you." They sat down in a little salon, momentarily void of other customers, and at Mascarot's advice Paul drank a couple of glasses of rum, which speedily brought the colour back to his cheeks. 'Strike the iron while it's hot,' says the proverb; and the agent having stunned his man, now deemed it advisable to finish him. "A quarter of an hour ago," he said, "I promised to remind you of your views in favour of M. de Gandelu."

"Enough!" interrupted Paul in a violent tone, "enough!"

Mascarot smiled with paternal benevolence. "You see," said he, "what different views we take of things, according to the position we stand in. Now you are beginning to be reasonable."

"Yes, I am reasonable—that is to say, I mean to be rich also. There

is no necessity now for you to urge me on, I am ready to do precisely as you desire. I don't wish ever to be exposed again to such a humiliation as I have undergone to-day."

B. Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. " You are angry," he said.

" My anger will pass away, but my intentions will remain the same."

As fast as Paul now advanced, just as rapidly did the agent retreat—such are the usual tactics in such cases. " Don't decide without mature deliberation," he said ; " you are still your own master. To-morrow, if you abandon yourself to me, you must resign your dearly loved liberty."

" I am ready for anything."

The agent had won the day.

" Very good," said he, with affected coldness. " Dr. Hortebize will present you to Monsieur Martin Rigal, Mademoiselle Flavia's father, and a week after your marriage, I will give you a ducal coat-of-arms to paint on your carriage panels."

XII.

WHEN Sabine de Mussidan told André she meant to throw herself on M. de Breulh-Faverlay's generosity, she had consulted the impulses of her heart rather than her strength. She recognised this fact, when she asked herself how she could keep this promise. Her whole nature revolted at the idea that she must ask for a rendezvous with any man, and allow him to read to the bottom of her soul ; and in this respect she would have dreaded a stranger less than M. de Breulh, for it seemed to her, that as he had asked for her hand, he had certain rights over her, even over her very thoughts.

All the way home in the cab with Modeste, Sabine never opened her lips. On her arrival, the dinner table awaited her presence. The bell was sounding just as she entered the house. The meal was a dismal one, for whilst Sabine herself was tortured with cruel anxiety, the count and countess were oppressed by remembrance of the threats of Dr. Hortebize and the honourable B. Mascarot. In the magnificent dining room, the servants went to and fro, fulfilling their duties with the superficial attention and mock respect which habit imparts. What did they care for their master's sadness, why should they take any interest in it ? Were they not well fed, well lodged and regularly paid ? They cared for little else. The superb and well appointed establishment was really theirs. How many houses there are in Paris where the masters seem to be their servants lodgers !

At nine o'clock, Sabine was alone in her own room, struggling with herself, and trying to reconcile herself to this interview with M. de Breulh. She did not sleep all night, and in the morning she felt utterly worn out ; but, nevertheless, she had no idea of evading her promise, or even of postponing its fulfilment. She had sworn to accomplish it at once, and André was naturally awaiting a letter with feverish impatience. The more she studied her situation, the more imperative seemed the necessity of a prompt determination. To let things take their own way, would be to run the risk of encountering insurmountable obstacles.

A young girl, it is said, cannot be married without her consent. This is a mistake, and so Sabine knew. And she could not confide in her father, still less in her mother. Without ever having been taken into their confi-

dence, she divined that their estrangement must have some bitter cause, and that misfortune loomed ahead in the future. Already, on leaving the convent where she had been educated, and returning home, she had been conscious of being in the way—of being *de trop*. She now, moreover, had the firm belief that her parents would look upon her marriage as the restoration of their liberty. They would then be free to separate, to fly from each other to the uttermost ends of the earth. She was the only link that held them together.

Realizing all this, her anguish became the greater, and she soon reached that state of mind when young girls take the most desperate resolutions. Yes, it seemed to her less painful, less hard, to abandon the paternal roof, than to face M. de Breulh and tell him the whole truth. Fortunately, frail as she looked, she had a certain amount of energy, and by force of circumstances had learned to depend upon herself. For André's sake, even more than for her own, she was anxious to remain within the limits of social laws. Unlawful happiness, which one must hide with shame, would entail any amount of moral suffering, and provoke the sneers and contempt of hypocrites. What she longed for was that legitimate felicity which may be displayed in the open sunlight with the full approval of God and man. At noon, yet undecided as to her course, she was still weeping and praying. Ah ! why was she motherless ? At one moment she thought of writing, but she realised it would be folly to confide to paper words one scarcely dares pronounce. The time passed, and Sabine was bitterly reproaching herself for what she deemed her lack of courage, when suddenly she heard the great iron gates being opened. A carriage was entering the courtyard. Naturally enough, she went to the window, looked out, and gave vent to a joyful cry. She had seen Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay alight from a phaeton, which he had been driving himself in spite of the excessive cold.

"God has heard me," she murmured, "and in answer to my prayers has sent him here ! The worst is over."

"What do you intend to do, mademoiselle ?" asked the faithful Modeste.
"Do you intend to speak to the gentleman here ?"

"Yes. My mother has not left her dressing-room, and no one will disturb my father in the library except by his express orders. If I stop Monsieur de Breulh in the hall, and ask him to go into the salon, I shall have fifteen minutes without interruption, and that is more than I need." Then, summoning all her courage, and mastering her last hesitation, she left the room.

André might well have been proud—he, the poor painter, the foundling—to see himself preferred to the man whom the Count de Mussidan had chosen for his daughter. The Baron de Breulh-Faverlay was one of the few men outside of the official world whom Paris cared to talk about ; and this was not surprising, for he had been singularly favoured by fortune. He was not yet forty ; he was remarkably good-looking, endowed with superior intelligence and wit ; and finally, he was one of the richest landowners in France. He was often asked how it happened that he took no part in public life. "I have already enough to do," he was in the habit of answering, "without making myself ridiculous !" Was his modesty real or feigned? No one could say. One thing was certain, that he seemed the last real in carnation of the old French nobility. His loyalty was unblemished, his courtesy chivalric, his wit exquisitely refined, and his disposition highly generous. He had had, it was said, great success with women ; however, even if the *on dits* were true, he had always discreetly refrained from compromising any one. His prestige was heightened by a mysterious cloud

which hung over his earlier years. He had not always been wealthy; an orphan, with a very insignificant patrimony, M. de Breulh had embarked for South America when he had barely reached his majority. He had remained there twelve years, sometimes fighting as a soldier of fortune, at others exploring the country, leading much the same adventurous life as contributed to the notoriety of Raousset-Boulbon, and Pindray. On his return to France, he was scarcely richer than before, but his uncle, the old Marquis de Faverlay, died, bequeathing him his immense fortune, on conditions that he added the name of Faverlay to that of Breulh. The baron had but one strong passion, and that for horses; but he showed his tastes like a true grand seigneur, not after the fashion of a groom. Such was all that the world knew of the man who held in his hands the destinies of André and Sabine de Mussidan.

He had just reached the hall, and was approaching the footmen, who had risen at his approach, when, seeing Sabine come down the stairs, he made her a deep bow. She walked straight towards him. "Monsieur," said she, in a voice that was almost unintelligible from emotion. "May I ask for the favour of a few minutes' conversation with you alone."

De Breulh concealed his astonishment under another bow even more profound than the first one. "Mademoiselle," he replied, gravely, "I am entirely at your orders."

At a sign from Sabine one of the footmen threw open the door of the same salon where Dr. Hortebize had seen the haughty Comtesse de Mussidan almost on her knees before him. The young girl preceded her visitor in utter carelessness of the conjectures and opinions of the servants. She did not ask M. de Breulh to take a chair, but, standing herself, and leaning against the marble mantelpiece, as if she feared her strength would fail her, she strove to master her agitation, and at length, after a long pause, embarrassing for both of them, succeeded in doing so. "My extraordinary conduct," she began, "will prove to you, sir, better than all explanations, how sincerely I respect your character and what absolute confidence I have in you." She hesitated, but De Breulh offered no remark. What was the girl about to say to him, he wondered; so far he hadn't the slightest idea. "You are a friend of my parents," she continued. "You have been able to form some opinion of the discomforts and unhappiness of our home. You know that, though my father and mother are living, I am quite as forsaken and desolate as any orphan—"

She paused, confused with shame. The idea that M. de Breulh might misunderstand her, and think that she was seeking to excuse herself by blaming others, revolted her pride. So, with a shade of haughtiness, which might have seemed misplaced under the circumstances, she resumed. "But I do not propose to justify myself. In venturing to ask for an interview with you, sir, it was simply because I wished to ask you—to entreat you to relinquish a project which is in contemplation, and to take upon yourself all the responsibility of the rupture."

This declaration was so utterly unexpected by M. de Breulh, that, great as was his self-control, acquired by constant intercourse with the world, he found it impossible to conceal his astonishment as well as a certain amount of mortification. "Mademoiselle—" he began.

But Sabine interrupted him. "It is a great favour," she said, "that I ask at your hands. Your generosity will spare me a bitter grief." Then, a dreary smile flickered over her pale face, she added, "The sacrifice I ask can be but a trifling one to you. I have the honour of being but slightly

known to you, and it is impossible that you can be other than indifferent to me."

The baron looked grieved, and answered gravely, "You are mistaken, mademoiselle, and you judge me ill. I have long since passed the age at which a man lightly takes haphazard resolutions. If I asked for your hand, it was because I knew how to appreciate your noble qualities of head and heart. The man whose name you may condescend to accept will be happy above all others." Sabine's lips parted, as if she wished to speak, but De Breulh went on: "And now, mademoiselle, how have I displeased you to be so dismissed? I do not know. Only, believe me when I tell you that I shall deplore it as a misfortune for the rest of my life."

The sincerity of M. de Breulh's grief was so evident that Sabine was really touched. "You have not displeased me, sir, and you honour me far beyond my merits," she answered. "I should have been proud and happy to become your wife if—"

She stopped short, choked by her tears, but M. de Breulh was cruel enough to insist on her continuing. "If?" he asked.

Sabine turned her head away, and in a faint voice replied: "If I had not given my heart and promised my hand to another."

"Ah!" exclaimed the baron.

Jealousy, accident, or intention, imparted to this ejaculation a sarcastic tone which wounded Sabine sorely. She turned quickly, and, with uplifted head, bravely met De Breulh's questioning eyes. "Yes, sir; another-chosen by myself, without the knowledge of my family. Another to whom I am as dear as he is to me."

The baron did not speak.

"And this should not in any way offend you," continued Sabine; "for when I met him I was as ignorant of your existence as you were of mine. There is, besides, no possible comparison between you. He is at the foot of the social ladder; you stand on the highest rung. You are noble; he belongs to the people. You are proud of having a title—the world speaks of the De Breulhs as it does of the De Coucys; he has not even a name. Your fortune is beyond all your desires; he labours in obscurity for his daily bread. Yes, sir, such is his position. He may have genius, but the cares of life weigh him down to earth. To obtain the means of studying art he learned a mechanic's trade, and if you ever take his hand you will find it hard with toil."

Had Mademoiselle de Mussidan purposely wished to grieve the gallant man whom she asked to serve her, she could hardly have spoken differently. In her inexperience, she thought entire frankness would best heal the wound she inflicted. Never, however, had she been so lovely as at that moment, when her whole nature was suffused by the glow of passion. Her voice had acquired a fuller, richer ring, her soul seemed to emerge from the windows of her eyes. "Now, sir," she said, "do you understand my preference? The wider and, to appearance, the more impassable the chasm separating us, the greater must be my fidelity to my oath. I know my duty. A woman, worthy of the name, must be hope and faith, the worker of miracles for the man who loves her. I may be called headstrong, no doubt. Maybe, even, the future has some terrible chastisement in store for me; but no one will ever hear one word of complaint from my lips. For—" She hesitated for one moment, and then, with quiet firmness, added, "For I love him!"

M. de Breulh listened to her, apparently unmoved, but in reality the most frightful of all passions—jealousy—was gnawing at his heart. He had

given Sabine a hint only of the truth : he had really loved her for a long time. It was the edifice of his whole future that she had unconsciously shattered. Yes, he was noble, he was rich ; but he would have given everything—title and fortune—to have been that other man, who toiled for his bread, who was nameless, but who was loved. Many another man in his place would have shrugged his shoulders and explained Sabine's conduct with the one word—“romantic !” But he did not ; his nature was sufficiently noble to understand hers. And what he admired the most in her was the frankness with which she went straight to her object, without apologies or hypocrisy ; he appreciated her courage and honesty. No doubt, she was imprudent and reckless in a certain way, but even in this respect again he liked her. As a rule, the young ladies educated like Sabine at the noble and moral Convent des Oiseaux are not wanting in prudence, finesse and skill. In these days of shallow gallantry, of low and vulgar love intrigues, when the notary who draws up the matrimonial contract resumes in his person almost all the poetry of marriage, M. de Breulh found himself in face of a true woman, a woman who might inspire and share a great passion. He had hoped to make this woman his wife, and now she escaped him. Still he longed to question her, to know the whole truth, perhaps because he still retained some faint ray of hope, or perhaps, because he took a savage delight in prolonging his sufferings. “And this other,” he asked, “how is it possible for you ever to see him ?”

“I meet him out walking,” she answered, “and I have even been to his rooms—”

“To his rooms—”

“Yes, I have given him repeated sittings for my portrait, and,” she added, haughtily, “I have nothing to blush for.”

M. de Breulh looked utterly confounded.

“You now know everything, sir,” resumed Sabine. “It has been very hard for me, a young girl, to tell this to you—to tell you what I dared not tell my mother. What ought I to do, and what will you do ?”

Only those who have heard a woman, whom they madly love, say, “I do not care for you ; I have given my life to another ; I can never love you ; relinquish all hope”—only those few can form a just idea of M. de Breulh’s state of mind and sufferings. Certainly, if he had indirectly heard of Sabine’s love affair, he would never have retired. He would have accepted the contest with the hope of triumphing over the happy mortal whom she preferred to himself. But now, when Mademoiselle de Mussidan personally asked his assistance and advice, it was impossible to take advantage of her confidence.

“It shall be as you wish, mademoiselle,” he replied, not without bitterness. “I will write to-night to your father to give him back his promise ; and it will be the first time in my life that I have ever broken my own. I have not yet decided what pretext I shall advance. I am sure that your father’s indignation will be great, but I will obey you.”

By this time Sabine had no strength left. “I thank you, sir,” she said, “from the bottom of my heart. Thanks to you I shall escape a contest, the very thought of which filled me with dread, for I had decided to resist my father’s wishes. Now, however—”

M. de Breulh did not seem to share Sabine’s feeling of security, for hastily interrupting her, he exclaimed, “Unfortunately, mademoiselle, you do not seem to realize the uselessness of the sacrifice you exact from me. Permit me to explain. So far, you have been very little in society,

and as soon as you appeared, the intentions of your parents concerning myself and you were well known. Consequently you attracted comparatively little attention. But to-morrow, when it becomes known that I have retired, twenty suitors will spring up in my place."

Sabine sighed, for this was the same objection that André had made.

"And, remember," continued De Breulh, "your situation will be infinitely more difficult. If your noble qualities are calculated to awaken the most elevated sentiments, your great fortune is equally likely to arouse cupidity."

Why had De Breulh used these words, fortune and cupidity? Were they an allusion to André? Sabine looked earnestly at the baron, but she read no irony in his eyes. "It is true," she said, sadly, "my dowry is very large."

"What will you reply to the next person who presents himself?"

"I don't know; but, no doubt, I shall find some plausible reasons for my refusal. Besides, if I act in obedience to the voice of my heart and conscience, I cannot do wrong. God will take pity upon me!"

This last phrase was a dismissal, and De Breulh, a thorough man of the world, could not fail to understand it as such; nevertheless, he did not move. "If I dared, mademoiselle," he began, "if I could hope that you would allow me, as a friend, to offer you a word of advice—"

"Speak sir, I beg of you."

"Well, then, why not remain on the same terms as at present? So long as our rupture is not known, your peace is secured. It would be a very simple thing to postpone all decisive steps for a year, and I should be ready to retire on the day you named."

Was there anything concealed behind this generosity? No; and Sabine did not for a moment doubt the baron. Still she answered, earnestly, "No, sir, no, this would be taking a most shameful advantage of you, and would place you in a mortifying position. Besides, reflect for a moment, this subterfuge would be unworthy of you, of me, and of him."

M. de Breulh did not urge the point. To his first feeling of wounded pride had succeeded a certain tenderness—a plan worthy of his chivalric character had occurred to him; but his respect for the young girl was so great, that he was anxious to word it in a way that would not offend her.

"Would it," he began, hesitatingly—"would it be taking advantage of the confidence you have so kindly placed in me, if I were to express to you the happiness I should feel if I were permitted to make the acquaintance of the man you have chosen?"

Sabine coloured deeply. "I have nothing to conceal from you," she said. "His name his André; as I told you he is an artist, and he resides in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, No.—"

De Breulh made a mental note of both the name and the address. "And now," said he with more firmness, "do not, I entreat of you, mademoiselle attribute my request to mere curiosity. I have but one wish, that of serving you. It would be very sweet to me to become your ally—to count for something in your life. I have powerful friends and relatives who give large sums—" His earnestness betrayed him into a false step. With the best intentions in the world, he had deeply wounded Sabine. Did he propose to patronize André, and thus make his own superiority of position and fortune all the more apparent? No woman could stand that.

"Thank you, sir," she replied, coldly. "But I know André so well. Any offer of assistance would humiliate him frightfully. I am absurd,

you think ? Excuse me, but our peculiar position requires we should be most reserved. Poor fellow ! his pride and self-respect are his sole titles to nobility." So saying, Sabine touched the bell rope, wishing to bring this painful interview to a close.

A servant at once appeared. "Have you informed my mother of this gentleman's visit ?" she asked.

"No, mademoiselle ; for both my master and mistress gave orders this morning that no one was to be admitted."

"Why did you not tell me that before ?" asked M. de Breulh, sternly ; and without waiting to hear the footman's very obvious justification, he bowed ceremoniously to Sabine, excused himself for having involuntarily intruded upon her, and went off, allowing the servants to see that he considered they had been wanting in their duty.

"Ah !" said Sabine, to herself, "that man is worthy of some good woman's love."

She was about to regain her own room, when hearing a noise in the hall, she drew back. The salon door had been left ajar, and she could hear some one insisting on seeing the Count de Mussidan, despite the objections of the servants who politely but firmly refused to show the visitor up-stairs.

"What do I care about your orders ?" said the intruder, "They are of no consequence to me. Am I your master's intimate friend or not ? Well, then go and tell him at once that I'm here—that I'm waiting to see him. Tell him this, or I shall go up-stairs myself !"

The visitor's obstinacy was greater than the servants' resistance, and in proof of this, he succeeded in entering the salon. He was none other than M. de Clinchan, the comrade of the Count de Mussidan's earlier years, and with Ludovic the keeper, a witness of the death of the unfortunate Montlouis. M. de Clinchan was neither tall nor short, neither thin nor stout, neither handsome nor ugly. His person was thoroughly commonplace, just like his mind and his attire. There was but one thing noticeable about him, and that a trifle—he wore on his watch-chain a large coral hand. He feared the evil eye. When young, he was already of a methodical turn of mind, and as he grew older, he had become almost a maniac. At twenty, he regularly counted the beating of his pulse, and at forty, he daily chronicled full particulars concerning his digestion. If Paradise were really the realization of our disappointed wishes here below, M. de Clinchan would certainly be a clock in the next world.

For the time being he was so disturbed that he did not even bow to Sabine. "What a shock," he murmured ; "and to come at this time, when I had eaten more heavily than usual. Even if I don't die of it, I shall certainly feel its effects for the next six months."

At the sight of M. de Mussidan, who at that moment appeared, he interrupted his soliloquy, and, running towards him, exclaimed, "Octave, save us both ! We are lost if you don't break off your daughter's marriage with—"

M. de Mussidan hastily placed his hand over M. de Clinchan's lips. "Are you crazy ?" asked the count. "Don't you see my daughter ?"

In obedience to an imperious glance from her father, Sabine fled from the room. But M. de Clinchan had said enough to fill her heart with alarm and distrust.

What was this rupture he spoke of, and with whom, and why ? And how could her marriage affect her father and his friend ? There was some mystery, certainly, and the eagerness with which the count had checked

his friend proved this clearly. She readily guessed that the name which M. de Clinchan had been prevented from uttering was that of M. de Breulh. One of those sinister presentiments, the truth of which it would be puerile to deny, warned her that the phrase which had been so summarily dealt with contained the key-note of her destiny. She felt certain that the conversation which her father and M. de Clinchan were about to have together was destined to affect her happiness. Ah ! if it were only possible for her to hear it. She longed to do so, not through curiosity, but tormented by an anxious fear. But then, what means could she devise ? While glancing round, she suddenly remembered that by passing through the dining-room she might reach one of the card-rooms, merely separated from the grand salon by a *portière*. She at once acted on this inspiration, and, installed behind the heavy curtain, found that she could hear everything that M. de Clinchan was saying.

He was still complaining. M. de Mussidan's gesture had been so violent that he had hurt his friend and almost made him fall. "Good heavens !" moaned M. de Clinchan. "How violent you are ! Ah ! what a day this has been ! Just fancy ! to begin with, a far too copious luncheon, then a violent emotion and a rapid journey here. Then your servants must make me angry ! I see you, feel overjoyed—but you almost knock me down, and I lose my breath. Why, at my age, it's ten times more than is necessary to provoke a serious illness."

Although the count was generally most indulgent as regards his friend's oddities, he was not now disposed to listen to him. "To facts, if you please," he said, in a sharp, decided tone ; "what has happened ?"

"Happened !" sighed De Clinchan. "Only that the Bivron affair is known. An anonymous letter, which I received an hour ago, threatens me with the most frightful misfortunes if I don't prevent you from giving your daughter to De Breulh. The rascals write that they have every proof—"

"Where is this letter ?"

De Clinchan drew the missive from his pocket. It was as explicit and threatening as possible, but it told M. de Mussidan nothing more than he knew already.

"Have you looked at your journal ?" asked the count ; "and are there really three leaves gone ?"

"Yes."

"How was it possible for them to be stolen ?"

"Ah ! how ? If you could only tell me."

"Are you sure of your servants ?"

"Certainly. Don't you know that Lorin, my valet, has been in my service for sixteen years ; that he was brought up by my father, and that I have fashioned him to suit my requirements. None of my other servants ever entered my private rooms. And besides, the volumes of my journal are stowed away in an oak *escritoire*, the key of which is always in my possession."

"Nevertheless, some one evidently had these volumes in his hands."

De Clinchan thought for a moment, and then suddenly clapped his forehead. "I have it !" he cried. "Some months ago, one Sunday, Lorin went to a *fête* in the environs of Paris, and drank too much wine with some men whose acquaintance he had made in the train. After drinking, they all began to quarrel, and he was so ill-used by his new friends that he was obliged to remain in bed for some weeks. He had a deep stab from a knife on one shoulder."

"Who was with you while he was laid up?"

"A young man whom my coachman procured from an employment agency."

The count fancied that here was a clue. He remembered that the man who had called on him had been impudent enough to leave a card on which was inscribed, "B. Mascarot, Employment Agency for Both Sexes. Rue Montorgeuil."

"Do you know," he asked, "where the agency your coachman went to is situated?"

"Certainly; in the Rue du Dauphin, almost opposite my house."

The count uttered a cry of rage. "Ah! the scoundrels are cunning," said he, "very cunning. However, my friend, if you feel as I do, and are ready to brave the storm, we two will face it together."

The mere idea sent a cold chill to M. de Clinchan's spine. "Never!" he cried, "never! My mind is made up. If you intend to resist, just tell me so frankly, and I will go home and blow out my brains!"

He was the sort of man to do precisely as he said. In spite of his many preposterous little ways, his personal bravery was uncontested, and he would ten times rather have gone at once to the last extremity than have remained exposed to constant annoyances, which would end by ruining his digestion.

"Very well, then, I will yield!" replied the count, with sullen resignation.

De Clinchan drew a long breath. As he was in ignorance of what his friend had passed through, he had supposed it a matter of far more difficulty to bring him to this decision. "For once in your life you are reasonable," he said.

"That is to say, I seem so to you, because I listen to your timid advice. A curse on your habit of confiding to paper, not only your own secrets, but other people's as well."

Now, if M. de Clinchan was at all "touchy," it was certainly in reference to his journal—his *magnum opus* and favourite hobby. "Good heavens!" cried he, "don't talk in that way. If you had not committed a crime, I should not have registered it!"

A long pause followed this cruel retort. Quivering with horror behind the *portière*, Sabine had heard every word. The reality had surpassed her presentiments. A crime!—a crime in her father's life!

However, the count had recovered from the shock occasioned by De Clinchan's words. "What is the use of reproaches?" he said. "Can we undo the past? No; we must submit. And so, this very day, I give you my word, I will write to De Breulh and inform him of the rupture of our plums."

This answer meant peace and security for M. de Clinchan; but after all his suspense he was unable to bear such joy. From red he became livid, tottered, turned round, and sank on a sofa, murmuring, "Too copious a meal—violent emotions—it was inevitable!" Another moment and he had fainted.

M. de Mussidan was extremely frightened, and pulled like a madman at the bell rope. The servants at once rushed in from every part of the house, and behind them came the countess herself. It was only with great difficulty that M. de Clinchan was revived. He at last began to move, opened one eye, then the other, and finally raised himself on his elbow.

"I am better," he said, with a sickly smile. "Weakness—dizziness—I

know what it is, and what I ought to take. Two spoonfuls of Elixir des Carmes in a glass of sugar and water, with entire repose of mind and body."

As he spoke he staggered to his feet. " My carriage is here, fortunately. Pray be prudent, Octave ; " and leaning on the arm of one of the footmen, he went out, leaving the Count and Countess de Mussidan alone together. In the card-room Sabine was still listening.

XIII.

SINCE the previous evening, that is, since raising his cane with the intention of punishing worthy B. Mascarot, the Count de Mussidan had been in a pitiable state. Forgetting his injured foot, he had spent the night walking up and down his library, puzzling his brain in vain efforts to find some means of freeing himself from virtual slavery. He felt the necessity of prompt action, for he had sufficient experience to understand that, in spite of Mascarot's protestations, this exaction was but the first of a long series which would become more and more exorbitant. Various plans occurred to him ; but on reflection he abandoned them one after the other. At one moment he thought of going to the Prefect of Police and confessing everything. Then he thought of appealing to some private detective, and following his advice. But the more he deliberated, the more he realized the solidity of the net he had been caught in, and the extent of the scandal which would take place if he ventured on a plan of resistance.

Twenty hours of this sort of thing had in some degree toned down the violence of his anger, and so, when M. de Clinchan was announced, he received his old friend with some degree of calmness. The anonymous letter had not surprised him ; in fact, it might almost be said that he had looked for something of the kind. The villains who held his secret had acted right cunningly in writing to his friend. They were plainly well acquainted with De Clinchan's weak character.

Now that the baron had gone, M. de Mussidan, still oppressed with gloomy forebodings, paced restlessly up and down the drawing-room, paying no heed to his wife's presence, and letting disjointed phrases fall from his lips. His unintelligible soliloquy soon irritated the countess, whose curiosity had been excited by what she had heard M. de Clinchan say. Was it not natural for her to be always on the *qui vive*, she whose position was so threatened ?

" What has so disturbed you, Octave ? " she asked. " Are you worried about M. de Clinchan's indigestion ? "

The count had been accustomed to that sharp, high-keyed voice of her's for many years, and had borne that satirical smile with comparative composure ; but this very poor jest at such a time was more than he could bear.

" Don't speak in that way ! " he angrily exclaimed.

" Dear me ! how rough you are ! Come, what is the matter ? Are you ill as well ? "

" Madame ! "

" Well, will you have the kindness to explain the meaning of all this ? "

The colour rushed to the count's face, and his anger blazed forth, all the more terribly on account of the self-restraint he had previously imposed upon himself. He paused in front of the countess, and with his eyes flaming with hate and passion, exclaimed, " I simply wish you to

understand, madame, that our daughter will not marry Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay."

This utterly unexpected declaration naturally delighted Madame de Mus-sidan. Half of the task imposed on her by Dr. Hortebize was accomplished without an effort on her part. Still, she naturally offered some objections. Women invariably begin, systematically and instinctively, by opposing even the designs they approve of. It is their way. Rightly or wrongly, they consider that resistance and argument are bound to further their views.

"Are you jesting, sir?" she asked. "How could we ever devise a more brilliant alliance? It was a piece of unexpected good fortune when M. de Breulh came forward."

"Oh! you need not be afraid," answered the count bitterly; "another suitor will be furnished you."

This phrase, prompted by the count's intense fears, almost terrified the countess. What had he meant? Was it an allusion? Had her husband referred to the Marquis de Croisenois? Was he aware of the influence which had been brought to bear upon her? However, she was a brave woman, one of those who prefer actual disaster to unlimited suspense, and so she determined to ascertain the truth at once. "What other suitor do you mean?" she asked with affected carelessness. "Has any one come forward, and how? And besides, may I ask, who presumes to dispose of my child without consulting me?"

"I do, madame."

The countess smiled contemptuously, and the count, who was watching her, now fairly lost his head. "Am I not master?" he cried, angrily. "Am I not driven to this exercise of authority by the threats of the scoundrels who have ferreted out the secret of my life—my crime—and who possess the proof they need to dishonour my name!"

The countess started to her feet, asking herself if her husband had not lost his reason. "A crime!" she gasped. "You!"

"Yes, I! Ah, it surprises you; and you never suspected it. And yet it's true. You will perhaps remember that accident at a shooting party, which saddened the first months of our married life. That young man—in the woods of Bivron! Ah, well, it was no accident. I deliberately aimed at him, shot him, murdered him in fact. And it is known now; the truth can be revealed and proved."

The countess, white with terror, recoiled with extended arms, as if to ward off danger.

"Ah, you are shocked, are you?" sneered the count. "I inspire you with horror, possibly. But don't tremble, there is no blood on my hands!"

And pressing them to his heart, as if he could barely breathe, he continued, "It is here that the blood is, and it stifles me. I have endured this for twenty-three years, and even now I wake in the dead of night—I wake, bathed in sweat, for in my dreams I have heard the poor fellow's death-rattle."

Madame de Mussidan sank on a chair. "How horrible!" she gasped.

"Yes; but you do not yet know why I killed him. Do you know what he dared to tell me? why, that the young wife I worshipped had a lover."

The countess started up with vehement denials on her lips, but as her husband coldly added, "And it was true—I learned the facts later," she fell back half fainting, hiding her face with her hands.

"Poor Montlouis," continued the count, slowly, "he was really loved—

loved by a little grisette, who toiled each day for the bread she ate. Still she was by nature a hundred times more noble than the haughty heiress whom I had married, and who was of the Sauvebourg race."

"Octave, Monsieur!"

"Ah! yes, and she proved it—Montlouis had seduced her. Still he meant to marry her; he told me so. Everyone believed her virtuous, but on her lover's death her shame became known—a child was born. People in small towns are pitiless. When she left the hospital with her infant in her arms, the old women pelted her with mud. She had to fly for safety. But for me she would have died of starvation. Poor child! It was little enough that I gave her, and yet, by dint of privations, she brought up her son decently. He is now a man, and, whatever happens, his future is secured—for I am there."

In such situations as that which now presented itself, the mind is too absorbed to pay attention to surroundings. M. de Mussidan and his wife were so wrapped up in their own sensations, that they did not hear the stifled sobs proceeding from the card-room where Sabine was concealed. According to her own account the countess had often had to suffer from her husband's violence. But he had never before shown such contempt for restraint. It seemed as if he could not control himself; or maybe, he took pleasure in giving course to the bitter feelings which had gathered in his heart during so many weary years.

"Now tell me, madame," he resumed, "tell me if it would not be the height of injustice to compare this poor girl to yourself. Have you ever listened to the voice of conscience? Have you ever trembled at the thought that God will certainly punish you some day—you, who were guilty as a daughter, criminal as a wife, and selfish and unworthy as a mother?"

Ordinarily, the countess held her ground with her husband, and was utterly indifferent to his reproaches, however well merited they might be; but to-day she lost courage.

"With you," continued the count, "shame and misfortune entered into my life. Who could have suspected the truth, when seeing you so gay and girlish, without a care on your brow, rambling under the old trees at Sauvebourg? How many times, in the days when my dream was to win you for my wife, did I watch you for hours without a suspicion that I was your dupe! Already, as a girl, you were expert in dissimulation. Your detestable passions never once dimmed the brightness of your eyes; who would have looked for guilt in them? They were so clear and frank. Ah! anyone else would have been deceived just as I was. When we entered the church, where our unfortunate marriage was solemnized, I mentally asked pardon for my own unworthiness. Miserable fool! Ere our honeymoon was over, you added adultery to your crimes!"

The countess made a gesture of denial, "It's false," she murmured; "they have lied to you!"

M. de Mussidan laughed a hollow laugh. "No," said he, "I have every proof. You think it extraordinary, do you? You have always taken me for one of those blind husbands who can be fooled with impunity. You thought you had tied a bandage over my eyes! You were mistaken. I perceived, I realised the truth. You may ask why I never spoke to you about it. Ah! it was because I loved you still. My passion was stronger than my will, than my pride, than my self-respect. It is only those who have never loved with the whole strength of soul and body who can laugh

at the moral cowardice of a man whose passion subsists, even when respect has gone."

He spoke with extraordinary vehemence, and the countess listened breathlessly, utterly confounded by his transports of passion. "I was silent," continued M. de Mussidan, "because I knew that if I ventured to say one word, you would be utterly lost to me. I could have killed you, but it was beyond my power to live apart from you. No, you will never know how many times you have been but a hair's breadth from death. At times when I kissed you, it seemed to me as if I could distinguish on your face the marks of other kisses than my own, and it required a great effort on my part not to strangle you then and there. And, finally, I found it hopeless to decide whether I really hated you, or loved you."

"Octave! mercy, Octave!" gasped the countess, joining both hands.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, your surprise is great," he said, "and yet if I pleased I could surprise you still more. But, enough!"

The countess shuddered. Did her husband know of the letters which had been stolen from her? All depended upon that. However, she was at least sure that he had not read them, for he would have expressed himself very differently had he known the mystery they referred to.

"Let me tell you—" she began.

"Nothing—not one word," answered her husband.

"I swear to you—"

"It is useless. But I must not forget to own what was my presumption in earlier days. You will laugh at me no doubt, but no matter. I actually comforted myself in the belief that I could win back your heart. I said that sooner or later you would be touched by my profound and faithful affection. It was absurd, wasn't it? As if any affection could have touched your cold heart!"

"Ah! how pitiless you are!"

He gave her a glance of hatred, and coldly retorted, "And you, what are you?"

"If you knew—"

"I know enough. I know the end that came to all my efforts. I drank the chalice of deception to the dregs. Each day widened the chasm between us, and at last we came to live this infernal existence which is killing me."

"You had only to say—"

"To say what? I could not act as your jailer! What would have been the good? I wanted your heart, your soul. It would have been a simple matter to imprison your body no doubt, but your thoughts would still have wandered away to some guilty rendezvous. I wonder how I had strength to linger near you. It was not to protect your honour, for that was gone—but simply to save appearances. With me at your side, you could not drag our name through the mire."

Madame de Mussidan once again tried to protest her innocence, but her husband did not even seem to hear her. "And moreover," he resumed, "I also wished to save something of our fortune, for your extravagance was a whirlpool which swallowed up millions. In what fire do you consume your banknotes, that not even their ashes can be found? Credit is refused you. Your jewellers and milliners think that I'm ruined, and it is precisely that belief of theirs that prevents me from being ruined. If I haven't liquidated our position it is because I don't wish to die in an almshouse; and, moreover, I have Sabine to think of, she must be richly dowered, and yet—"

He hesitated ; what could be the reason of this hesitation after all he had said ? Madame de Mussidan repeated his words interrogatively—"And yet ?"

"Never !" he cried, with a fearful explosion of rage, "never once have I kissed that child, without feeling this horrible doubt : Is Sabine really my daughter ?"

The countess rose indignantly. No, this she could not bear. "Enough," she cried, "enough ! Yes, Octave, I have been guilty, frightfully guilty, but not as you believe."

"Why do you attempt to defend yourself ?"

"Because it is my duty to defend Sabine."

The count shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "It would have been better to have thought of that earlier," he answered. "It would have been better to have watched over the development of her character, to have shown her what was right and noble, and to have learned to read her young heart—to have been her mother, in a word."

The countess was in such a state of agitation that, had her husband noticed it, he would certainly have been surprised. "Ah ! Octave," she cried, "why did you not speak sooner—if you knew ? But I will tell you everything—everything."

However the count, unfortunately, stopped her. "Spare both of us these explanations," he said. "If I have at last broken the long silence of years, it is because I know that nothing you could say now could touch or move me."

Madame de Mussidan fell back on the sofa, realizing that there was no longer any hope. In the card-room all was silent ; the sobs had ceased ; Sabine had had strength enough to drag herself to her own room.

The count was about to take refuge in the library again, when a servant knocked at the door. He carried a silver salver, in the centre of which lay a letter.

M. de Mussidan hastily broke the seal ; the missive was from M. de Breulh, who asked to be released from his promise. Coming after so many shocks, this proved the crowning blow. Unaware of his daughter's interview with the baron, M. de Mussidan fancied he could again detect the hand of that mysterious agent who had threatened him, and the power of those unknown folks, whose slave he was, absolutely terrified him. However, he had little time for reflection ; for at that moment Modeste, his daughter's maid, rushed into the salon, crying, "Help, Monsieur le Comte ! help, madame ! Mademoiselle Sabine is dying !"

XIV.

VAN KLOPEN, the illustrious "ladies' tailor," knew Paris—men and things—thoroughly. Like all tradesmen whose operations are based on a system of extensive credit, he constantly needed information respecting people and their fortunes—real and prospective. He never forgot anything he heard, and by dint of research, memory, and practice, his brain had become a perfect post-office directory. So when Mascarat spoke to him of the father of the pretty brunette, Flavia, whose beauty had so impressed Paul Violaine, the arbiter of fashion unhesitatingly replied, "Martin-Rigal ? Yes, I know him ; a banker."

And a banker Martin-Rigal was, to be sure. He lived in a superb house

in the Rue Moatmartre, almost opposite the church of St. Eustache. He resided on the second storey, whilst his offices occupied the whole of the first floor. Although M. Martin-Rigal did not figure among the financial princes of Paris, he was, nevertheless, thoroughly respected. He mainly carried on business with those petty tradespeople, so numerous in the French capital, who only subsist thanks to innumerable shifts and devices, and remain perpetually in terror of settling days.

The banker held almost all the persons whom he did business with in the hollow of his hand, as it were. What would have become of them had he, some fine morning, taken it into his head to close his doors? They could not have met their engagements; judgments would have been issued; failure and ruin would have followed. The power he possessed was wielded by Martin-Rigal in the most arbitrary fashion. He admitted no restraint to his despotism. When he had settled on any measure, any one audacious enough to ask, "Why?" was answered, "Because," purely and simply. It was the cashier who made this reply, be it understood; for the banker himself was hardly ever seen.

In the morning he was always invisible, shut up in his private office, and not one of the clerks had sufficient courage to knock at the door; besides, even had they done so, no reply would have been elicited. The experiment had been tried, and it was believed that nothing short of a cry of fire would have aroused their master.

The banker was a tall man, with a remarkably bald head. His face, with its high cheek bones, was always scrupulously shaven, and his little gray eyes twinkled with a restless light. When he talked, if he were in doubt respecting a choice of words, or if a wrong one escaped him, he had a peculiar hobby, that of raising his right hand to his nose. His urbanity was perfect. He said the cruellest things in a honied tone, and invariably escorted to the door, with repeated apologies and bows, the unlucky applicant whom he had refused to oblige with a small loan. Despite his years, he dressed with youthful elegance, after the fashion of the rising financial school. Apart from business, he was said to be amiable, obliging, and even witty. It was reported, moreover, that he in no wise despised those good things of life which enable us to travel through this vale of tears. He by no means turned up his nose at a good dinner, or turned his back on a young and pretty face. He was, however, a widower, and had but one serious passion in the world—his only child—Flavia. It is true that in his passion there is one fanatical trait—that of the Indian who crushes everything under his idol's chariot-wheels, and is even prepared to immolate himself.

M. Martin-Rigal did not keep up a very expensive establishment; but in the neighbourhood it was said that Mademoiselle Flavia's teeth were sharp enough to crunch millions. The banker himself always walked, it was more healthy, he said; but his daughter had a carriage and two fine horses to drive in the Bois under the protection of a duenna, half companion, half relative, who was somewhat touched in the head. Flavia's father had never yet ventured to deny her anything. Sometimes a kind friend pointed out to him that this perpetual adoration might ill fit Flavia for the future; but upon this point he was intractable, and invariably replied that he knew what he was doing; and that, if he worked like a dog, it was simply that his daughter might have all she needed, and a great deal more besides.

It is certain that he did more work than all his employés put together. After remaining since early morning at his desk, busy with figures, at four

in the afternoon he would open the door of his private room, and grant audience to all who might wish to see him.

Thus it happened that a couple of days after Paul and Flavia had met in Van Klopen's *salon*, at about half past five o'clock, M. Martin-Rigal sat in his private office listening to one of his clients. She was pretty, very pretty, young, and dressed with charming simplicity; but she looked very sad, and her beautiful eyes were brimful of tears. "I must acknowledge to you, sir," she was saying, "that if you refuse to renew this note, we are ruined. I can manage its payment in January. I have disposed of all my jewels, and there isn't a silver spoon left in the house."

"Poor little woman!" interrupted the banker.

These compassionate words raised her hopes. "And yet," added she, "our trade has never been so promising; we have finished paying for the 'good-will,' and new customers are constantly coming in."

She expressed herself in such clear terms that M. Martin-Rigal listened with pleasure. A real Parisienne shines in a position of this kind; less easily discouraged than her husband, and more self-reliant, she keeps a steady head when he would lose his.

As he heard this explanation of a situation which he thoroughly understood, the banker nodded his bald pate, as if approvingly. None the less, however, he finally exclaimed, "All that is very well; but it does not make the endorsements you offer me higher in value. If I had any confidence, it would be in you."

"But, sir, we have more than thirty thousand francs' worth of goods in the establishment."

"I don't mean that."

He underscored these words with such a singularly expressive smile that the poor woman coloured to the roots of her hair, and almost lost her self-possession.

"Don't you understand," he resumed, "that your merchandise inspires me with no more confidence than the endorsements you offer? Suppose you fail, for instance; what would the goods be sold for? And besides, as you know, landlords have certain privileges as creditors—"

He stopped short, for at this moment Flavia's maid, profiting by her mistress's despotic power, entered the office without knocking. "Sir," said she, "mademoiselle wants you at once."

The banker rose immediately. "I am coming!" he exclaimed; "I am coming!" and taking his pretty client by the hand, to escort her more rapidly to the door, he added, "Come, don't be low-spirited; we will arrange all these difficulties. Come again, and we will talk the matter over."

She wished to thank him, but he was already half way up the stairs.

Flavia had sent for her father so that he might admire her new toilette, just sent from Van Klopen's, and which, after trying on, she was immensely delighted with. The fact is, that the "Tailor to the Courts of Europe" had surpassed even his usual achievements. Flavia's dress was one of those *chefs-d'œuvre* of bad taste—unfortunately fashionable—which give every woman the same odious, doll-like aspect, and seem intended to deprive them of all natural grace and distinction. The *robe* in question was a mass of trimmings, puffs, and flounces, of various tints, oddly contrasted and all but revolting to the artistic eye. Van Klopen had been faithful to his system—for he has a system which can be summed up in these two axioms: First: Cut each dress in such a way that it shall be utterly useless as soon as slightly rumpled. Second: Employ some cheap stuff as the main

material (this is particularly pleasing to husbands), and multiply the number of costly trimmings. More than one dressmaker has profited by the very same theories.

Flavia cared nothing, however, for the economical side of the question. Standing in the centre of the salon, where the chandelier was lighted, for night was now coming on, she was studying some new steps and turns, rehearsing, in fact, so as to show her dress to the best advantage : and she was really so naturally pretty and graceful, that Van Kloopen's masterpiece failed to spoil her looks. Suddenly she turned ; for in the mirror before her she had caught a glimpse of her father, who came in quite out of breath from having rushed so quickly up the stairs.

"How long you have been !" she exclaimed.

Now he had not really lost a second, and still he nervously began to apologise. "I was with a client," he said ; "so that—"

"You ought to have sent him away at once."

He attempted another explanation, but she at once cut him short, exclaiming, "Never mind ; but now, open your eyes wide, look at me, and tell me frankly how you think I look."

There was no need of the banker replying in words, for a look of absolute unreasoning admiration appeared on his face. Nevertheless he fervently ejaculated, "Charming ! Divine !"

Accustomed as she was to paternal incense, Flavia appeared delighted. "Then," said she, "you think I shall please him ?"

The "him" was Paul Violaine, as the banker knew right well. He sighed deeply, as he answered, "How is it possible for you not to please him ?"

"Alas !" she answered with a pensive air, "if it were any one else, I shouldn't have a doubt, nor one of these cruel misgivings that now disturb my peace."

M. Martin-Rigal had sat down near the chimney, and now placing his arm around his daughter's waist, and drawing her towards him, he pressed a kiss on her brow, whilst she, with coquettish, feline grace, glided to a seat on his knee. "Suppose," she continued, "that he shouldn't like me. Just think of that, father ! I should die of sorrow."

The banker turned away his head to conceal his sad impression.

"Do you love him really so much ?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"More than me ?" he added.

Flavia took her father's head in her hands and shook it gently, as with a clear bell-like laugh, she answered, "Oh, how stupid you are, poor papa ! How can I compare you ? I love you first, because you are my father. I love you, too, because you are good, because you always do precisely as I wish, because you always tell me you love me, because you are like the enchanters in fairy-land, you know—those old, old men with long beards, who always give their god-children everything they want. I love you for all the happiness you give me : for my carriage, my pretty horses, and my beautiful dresses, for the bright gold pieces you give me, without counting, for the pearl necklace round my neck, for this new bracelet—for everything, in fact."

The enumeration was desolating. Each word evinced her absolute, intolerable selfishness ; and yet the banker listened with a smile, charmed and delighted, in a state of unreasoning beatitude. "Well, and why do you love him ?" he asked.

"Because," said Flavia, suddenly becoming very serious—"because I love him; first, because he is himself, and then—and then—I love him!"

Her tone revealed such intensity of passion, that the poor father with difficulty restrained a gesture of despair.

She saw the expression of his face, and burst out laughing. "You are jealous, I do verily believe," she exclaimed, in the tone a parent adopts towards a child who has committed some trifling fault. "Fie for shame! That's very naughty, sir! You don't even like that window, because I first saw Paul from it. That's very wrong, very bad indeed!"

Still, like a scolded child, the father dropped his head.

"Ah! well," resumed Flavia, "I love that window, for it recalls to me the strongest, sweetest emotion of my life. It was four months ago, and yet, father, it seems to me as if it were only this morning. I had gone to the window, without a motive—purely by chance—yes, chance, and yet we are told we are the masters of our own destinies. What utter nonsense! I looked out carelessly enough, when suddenly, in a window of the house over the way, I saw him. It was absolutely like a flash of lightning. That one second decided my life. I, who never felt a thrill here before"—and, so saying, she laid her hand on her heart—"now felt the most intolerable pain, 'twas like a red hot iron."

The banker seemed to be in agony, but his daughter saw nothing of it. "All day long," she continued, "it seemed to me as if there were no air to breathe; as if there were an immense weight on my heart, and a band of iron round my head. It was not blood that circulated through my veins, but liquid fire. At night I could not sleep, I shivered with cold, I was bathed in sweat; and, without knowing why, I felt frightened."

The banker shook his head sadly. "Flavia, poor, dear, foolish child!" he said, "why did you not confide in me then?"

"I wanted to do so, papa, but I was afraid."

M. Martin-Rigal raised his eyes in mute surprise to the ceiling as if calling on heaven to witness that this fear of his child was utterly without foundation.

"You don't understand it!" said Flavia. "You are the best of fathers, but you are a man. Ah! if I had a mother she would understand."

"Ah! what could your poor mother have done that I have omitted?" sighed the banker.

"Nothing, probably; you may be right, for there are days when I hardly understand myself; and yet I have been very, very firm and courageous since then, for I swore to myself that never again would I open that window. For three days I resisted every temptation, on the fourth, I looked out, and there he was, leaning with his forehead against the window-pane, and looking so sad, that I turned away and began to cry."

The banker, the hard-hearted man of business, whom a luckless client's misfortunes had never touched, had his eyes full of tears.

"After that," resumed Flavia in a softer voice, "I resisted no longer. Why struggle against destiny? Each day I went to the window. It did not take me long to discover what he was doing. I soon found that he was giving lessons to two tall thin girls I had often seen in the street. Poor fellow! I watched him each day as he went in and came out of the house. Ah! papa, if you only knew how sad he looked; sometimes he was so pale, and seemed so weak, that I asked myself if he were not almost starving! Think of it! He suffering with hunger, and I so rich! I learned the meaning of

each expression in his face, and found, when he was happy, he made this gesture," and, so saying, she imitated one of Paul's movements with which all his acquaintances were familiar.

"But one day, alas!" she resumed, "he disappeared. For a whole day I remained at that window, waiting and hoping—all in vain. Then I fell ill, as you know, and told you everything, and said besides, that I would never marry any other man."

It was in gloom and sadness that the banker listened to this narrative, which was by no means new to him.

"Yes," he murmured, "it all happened just as you say. You were ill, and as I thought dying, when I promised that I would find out who this young fellow was—"

With a joyful impulse, Flavia flung her arms round her father's neck and pressed kiss after kiss on his forehead. "And it was like that," she exclaimed, "that you cured me! And you will keep your word, dear papa, will you not? Darling! I love you more for this than for anything else in the world. And, to think that, that very day, merely with the information I gave you, you went in search of my mysterious artist!"

"Alas! my child, I am your slave!"

Flavia drew herself up, and gaily shaking her dainty little fist at her father: "What does that 'alas!' mean, sir?" she asked, with a pretty affectation of sternness. "Do you regret your goodness and obedience?"

He did not answer, for she was correct in her surmises.

"I would give my prettiest necklace," cried Flavia, "to know what means you took to find out all about him, for you never gave me any particulars. Come, don't hide anything. How did you discover him, and how do you intend to bring him here without arousing his suspicions?"

Her father smiled a kindly smile. "That is my secret, little one," he answered.

"Very well; keep it. After all, I care little for the means now that I know that you were successful; for to-night—just think of it—to-night, perhaps in an hour, perhaps in a few minutes, Dr. Hortebize will bring him here, and he will sit at our table, where I can look at him at my ease. I shall hear him speak—"

"Silly little girl," interrupted the banker. "Unhappy child."

She looked at him and answered, earnestly: "Silly—perhaps so; but why do you call me unhappy?"

"You love him too much," said her father with profound conviction, "and he will take advantage of it."

"Ah!" replied Flavia, with all the sincerity of passion, "he, take advantage? Never!"

"I hope to God, my darling, that my presentiments deceive me. But he is not the sort of man I intended for you. He is an artist—"

Flavia now really angry, rose from her father's knees. "And is that anything against him? An artist! Judging by your tone, one would think that a crime. Why don't you reproach him with his poverty as well. He is an artist, to be sure, but he is a genius. I can see that in his face. He is poor, I know; but I am rich enough for both. He will owe everything to me—so much the better then. When my fortune is his, he will not be compelled to give pianoforte lessons, he will be able to make a worthier use of his talents. He will write operas, like those of Félicien David, like that beautiful *Desert*, operas more beautiful than Gounod's. They will be performed, and the theatres will be crowded. And I shall be in my box,

glorying in the choice of my heart. His poetry will belong to the world no doubt, but the poet will be my own. And if I choose, he shall sing his divine songs for me alone."

She was in a state of such extraordinary exaltation, and seemed so convinced of the reality of the scene her words had conjured up, that the excitement brought on a cough which seemed to rend her delicate chest.

Her father looked at her with an expression of intense grief. Flavia's mother had been carried away at twenty-four by that pitiless malady, popularly known as a "galloping consumption," which is the despair of modern science, and which in less than a month transforms a blooming young girl into a corpse. "Are you in pain, Flavia?" asked the banker, in a tone which betrayed the anxiety he felt.

"I in pain?" she rejoined, with an ecstatic look. "Can joy hurt me?"

"By the sun in heaven," cried Martin-Rigal, with a threatening gesture, "if that wretch ever makes you shed a tear, he is a dead man!"

The girl was startled at the fierceness of his tone. "What is the matter, dear father?" she asked. "What have I said to make you so angry? Why do you call Paul a wretch?"

"Because," answered the banker, unable to restrain himself—"because I tremble for you. He has robbed me of my child's heart, and I can only forgive him if you live even more happily with him than with your old father. I am frightened, because you do not know him, whilst I do. From the hour when you pointed him out to me in the crowd, all my friends, all the people who are under obligations to me, have watched him. From that moment spies have followed him night and day. I have not been satisfied with learning every particular of his present life; I have also made inquiries respecting his past. He has hardly had a thought I have not learnt, hardly uttered a word that has not been brought to me. I have studied him faithfully, or rather my friends have studied him with the greatest possible care; so that he has not a secret at the bottom of his conscience which we do not know of."

"And have you found nothing against him?"

"No, nothing! Only, remember this, he is weaker than the veriest twig that grows, and more inconstant than the withered leaf blown by the faintest breeze! No, nothing! But he is one of those neutral characters, as undecided for good as for evil, who go wherever they are bid, without aim, energy or will."

"So much the better. My will will be his."

Her father smiled drearily. "You are mistaken, my daughter, as many another woman has been before you. You all think that weak characters—those that are timid and vacillating—are easily governed. Let me tell you that this is a great mistake. It is only strong characters that can really be influenced; it is only upon solid foundations that we lean for support. Close your hand on a bit of marble, close it firmly, and it is still there; but do the same with a handful of sand, and it slips through your fingers."

Flavia did not open her lips; her father drew her again gently on his knees. "Listen to me, little one—to your old father," he said solemnly; "you will never have a better friend than he. You know that every drop of blood in my veins would be gladly shed if it could do you any good. Paul is coming; be prudent. Guard yourself against a momentary illusion, a passing fancy—"

"Oh! papa."

"Very well; but heed what I say. Remember that your happiness de-

pends upon your conduct now. Be careful and hide your feelings. Do not let them be suspected. Men are so made that, while finding fault with women for their duplicity, they complain still more of their frankness. Trust in my experience ; remember that absolute security kills a man's love, and even a woman's."

He stopped short, for the sound of a bell was heard—that of the door of their apartments. Flavia's heart gave a great leap, and her whole body vibrated like the bell itself. "It is he!" she gasped ; and making a great effort to regain composure, she added, "I will obey you, dear father ; I will not appear until I have recovered my self-control and our other guests have arrived. Don't be anxious ; I intend to prove to you that your daughter can be as good an actress as other women."

She fled as the door of the *salon* opened ; but it was not Paul who entered. The first arrivals were friends of the house—a stout manufacturer and his wife, exquisitely dressed, but otherwise totally insignificant. That evening the banker had invited a party of twenty. A great dinner more easily explained and justified Paul's invitation.

At that very moment, B. Mascarot's protégé was ringing at the door of Dr. Hortebize, who was to act as his sponsor regarding his introduction into society. Paul had just left the hands of a fashionable tailor, and it was this that had delayed him. Thanks to Mascarot's influence, this tailor had, in forty-eight hours, prepared one of these evening suits, the mere aspect of which is more conducive to matrimonial success than anything the most enamoured suitor could say. The glossiness of the material, the daintiness of the cut, in fact, the perfection of the whole "get-up" greatly enhanced Paul's natural good looks and air of distinction. He was, perhaps, somewhat ill at ease in this elegant attire ; but at his age, or rather at the age he seemed to have, his embarrassment might easily be mistaken for timidity, and this made him appear even additionally interesting.

At all events he looked so well, so prepossessing, that, on seeing him, the doctor smiled approvingly. "Flavia's taste is to be decidedly commended," he murmured. And then, interrupting Paul, who was apologizing for being so late, he added aloud, "There is no harm done. Sit down ; I will be ready in a moment."

Hortebize went into his dressing-room, while Paul Violaine let himself fall on to the lounge. He was utterly worn out with fatigue—for five nights he had had no sleep. Each night he had been seized with fever, and had risen and paced his room, a prey to anxiety and mental torture. This cannot be wondered at ; for his situation was most unexpected, most incredible. His honesty, which he had so boasted of to Rose, had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. When, on leaving Van Kloopen's, Paul had said to Mascarot, "I am yours," he had but obeyed the impulse of wounded vanity. He had, moreover, been dazzled by Mascarot's mysterious power, and Flavia's beauty, and fascinated by the millions of dowry she was reported to have ; but in the evening, when again alone, he was terrified at the remembrance of his imprudence, and thought with dread of the demands which might be made upon him. What mysterious designs was he to further? Would he ever recover his liberty, his self-control? However, on the following day he dined with Mascarot at Hortebize's residence, and the certainty of the doctor's complicity had decided him to stifle the last lingering qualms of conscience. It is often thus ; according to its sphere, vice, or crime even, becomes a temptation or a

lesson. When it is low, vulgar, and coarse, it repels one, and hesitating honesty wins the day. But wealthy, witty, fortunate and triumphant, it rouses in feeble minds a furious longing, fanned by the hope of impunity.

The doctor's luxurious abode and surroundings, his air of a man of the world, his ingenious paradoxes and contempt of the law were bound to complete the work of corruption which worthy B. Mascarat had begun. "I should be a fool," thought Paul, "if I hesitated or struggled any longer, when this physician, whom I see rich, happy, and respected, has no scruples whatever."

He would have hesitated, however, had he known what was enclosed in that gold medallion which dangled on the watchguard of his new associate and patron. But this Paul could not know, admitted as he was for the first time to the doctor's magnificent apartments, which comprised the whole first floor of a fine old house in the Rue de Luxembourg near the Madeleine. In the very ante-chamber, a visitor could divine that this was the abode of some aimable egotist, some witty epicurean, who considered that the time and money spent in feathering his nest was by no means thrown away. "I mean to be lodged in the same style," Paul had murmured to himself, with jealousy gnawing at his heart.

He was still reclining on the lounge when the doctor re-appeared, as carefully attired as was always his wont when he was going into society. "I am ready," he said to Mascarat's protégé, now in some measure his own. "Come, we shall arrive just in the nick of time."

The doctor's "pill box," drawn up by a superb trotter, was waiting at the door, and as Paul settled himself comfortably inside, he inwardly reflected, "I will have a brougham of my own like this."

However, if the young fellow forgot the present for the future, the doctor who had received his instructions, was on the *qui vive*. "Come, let us have a few words of conversation now," he said, as the carriage rolled rapidly along. "You are now offered an opportunity such as rarely falls in any young man's way, no matter what his social connections may be; you must take advantage of it. Don't let the chance slip."

"Oh, you may rely on me," replied Paul, with a self-satisfied smile.

"Bravo! my dear boy; I admire your youthful audacity, only you must allow me to fortify it with my experience. And to begin with, do you really know what an heiress is?"

"I think—"

"Let me speak, please. An heiress—and still more if she is an only child—is generally an extremely disagreeable young person, headstrong, capricious, and filled with a sense of her own importance. She is completely spoiled, moreover, by the adulation she has been accustomed to from infancy. Certain of suitors because of her dowry, she thinks she may do everything she pleases."

"Oh!" said Paul, singularly crestfallen by this description. "Are you sketching Mademoiselle Flavia's portrait?"

The doctor laughed frankly enough. "Not precisely," he answered, "only I ought to warn you that our heiress has her fancies and whims. For instance, I believe she is quite capable of doing anything to turn a suitor's head, simply with the object of ultimately rejecting him, and enjoying his disappointment."

Paul, who had so far seen only the bright side of his adventure, was overwhelmed on learning that the medal had two sides, a point which he

had not once thought about. "If it be like that," he said sadly, "what is the use of introducing me?"

"Why, so that you may succeed. Haven't you everything requisite for success? It may be that Mademoiselle Flavia will receive you with extreme cordiality, nevertheless don't draw any favourable conclusions from this. Even if she should fairly throw herself at your head, I should still say beware; it may only be a snare. Between ourselves, a girl who possesses a million is quite excusable in trying to find out whether you have lost your heart to her money or herself."

The carriage stopped; they had reached the Rue Montmartre. After giving his coachman orders to return at midnight, the doctor, with his protégé, entered the house. Paul was so perturbed that he with difficulty drew on his gloves.

There were some fifteen persons present when the footman announced Dr. Hortebize and Monsieur Paul Violaine. However much the banker may have disliked the man his daughter had chosen, there was no indication of it in his reception. After pressing the hand of his old friend, the doctor, he thanked him most effusively for having brought such a talented and desirable acquaintance as M. Violaine. This reception in some degree restored Paul's self-possession. But he tired his eyes in vain, in trying to perceive Mademoiselle Martin-Rigal. The dinner hour was seven o'clock; and it was only some five minutes beforehand that Flavia appeared, to be at once surrounded by the other guests. She had succeeded in concealing her feelings, and no matter what may have been her inner thoughts, she looked at Paul with an air of utter indifference as he bowed before her. Her father was delighted, for he had by no means anticipated so much self-possession. But Flavia had thought much of his last words, and had recognised their justice. Seated at some distance from Paul, she courageously abstained from even one glance in his direction during the meal.

It was only after dinner, when the whist tables were made up, that she ventured to approach him, and in a voice that trembled, despite all her efforts, ask him to kindly play on the piano a few of his own compositions. Whatever may have been Paul's proficiency as a composer, he was by no means a remarkable performer, and yet Flavia listened to him with an air of beatitude as if some celestial sympathy resounded through the room. Seated side by side, M. Martin-Rigal and Dr. Hortebize watched her with kindly solicitude.

"How she loves him!" murmured the banker; "and yet we really know nothing of the effect she has produced upon him."

"Pshaw! Mascarot will draw it all out of him to-morrow."

The banker made no reply, and the doctor resumed, "Now I think of it, poor Mascarot has a full day's work before him. At ten o'clock, there's the council general, Rue Montorgueil, when we hope to find out what's at the bottom of Catenac's bag. I am curious, too, to learn what the Marquis de Croisenois will say when he discovers what is expected of him."

Meanwhile the hour was growing late, and the guests were gradually retiring. The doctor made a sign to his protégé, and they left together. Flavia, as she had promised, had played her part so well, that Paul asked himself whether he might hope or not.

XV.

WHENEVER B. Mascarot called his partners together in solemn council, Beaumarchef was in the habit of arraying himself in his best clothes. Not merely on such occasions was he often called into the private room to answer questions, and thus desired to appear to the best advantage, but, moreover, as a retired sub-officer, he had a great respect for rank, and realised what was due to his superiors. He reserved, therefore, for these great occasions his most superb trousers of the hussar pattern, with a black frock-coat showing both his chest and waist to advantage, and a pair of high boots, garnished with gigantic spurs. Moreover, he was particularly careful to stiffen the points of those long moustaches of his, which in their time had pierced so many feminine hearts.

On this particular occasion, however, the sub-officer, although he had received due notice of the expected meeting, still wore his everyday clothes at nine o'clock A.M. He was seriously distressed thereat, and only consoled himself by constantly repeating that his irreverence was entirely involuntary. It was the truth, moreover; for at daybreak he had been roused to make out the bills of two cooks, who, having found situations, were about to leave the establishment which Mascarot had organised for servants out of place. As soon as this was settled, he hoped to have time to array himself; but just as he was crossing the court-yard, whom should he meet but Toto-Chupin, arriving to report himself. Beaumarchef at once went with him into the outer office, thinking, no doubt, that the youngster's report would, as usual, only be a matter of some few minutes. He was grievously mistaken. There was little change in Toto's appearance. He still wore his dirty gray blouse, his old misshapen cap, and his face had its habitual knowing grin; but, on the other hand, his ideas had considerably changed. In fact, when the ex-sub-officer asked him to state briefly what he had done on the previous day, Toto unexpectedly interrupted him with a cynical grimace and gesture full of meaning.

"I haven't wasted my time," he said; "I have even made some new discoveries, only before telling you one word—"

"Well, go on."

"I wish to make my conditions."

This remark, enforced by an expressive movement of the hands, so surprised Beaumarchef, that at first he could make no rejoinder. "Conditions?" he repeated at last.

"Certainly—you can do as you please, of course; you can take it or leave it. Do you think that I am going to work like a dog, lose my sleep and all that, for a mere thank you? I am worth more than that."

Beaumarchef was exasperated.

"I know that you are not worth the salt to your bread," he exclaimed.

"All right."

"And you are an ungrateful little scamp to talk like that, after all the kindness M. Mascarot has shown you."

Chupin burst out laughing. "Kindness! indeed!" he cried. "One would think my employer had ruined himself for me. Poor man! I should like to know what this wonderful kindness is."

"He picked you up in the street one night in a snow-storm, and has given you a room in the house ever since."

"A kennel, you might call it."

"He gives you your breakfast and your dinner every day—"

"I know that, and half a bottle of wine at each meal that has been so well watered that it can't even stain the table-cloth!"

"You are an ungrateful boy," rejoined Beaumarchef; "you forget that you have also been set up in business as a chestnut vendor."

"Yes, under the *porte-cochère*. I am allowed to stand there from morning till night, frozen on one side and baked on the other; and what do I earn? Perhaps twenty sous. Come, I've had enough of that; and besides, just now the trade isn't worth a curse."

"But you know that in summer you will have all you need given to you to sell—fried potatoes."

"Thank you; I don't like the smell of the fat."

"Then what do you wish to do?"

"Nothing; I feel that I was born to live on my income."

Beaumarchef was at a loss for a retort. "All right," said he at length; "I shall tell all that to the governor, and then we'll see."

This threat made no impression on Toto. "I don't care a fig for the governor," he answered. "What can old Mascarot do? Dismiss me? All right; I'm prepared."

"You young scamp!"

"Scamp! Why's that? Don't you think I ever eat before I met Mascarot? I lived a deal better, let me tell you; and I was free. Why, merely with begging, singing in courts, and under doorways, I made my three francs a day. We drank them together, my pals and I, and then we went off to sleep at Ivry in an old tile factory, where the bobbies never showed their noses. It was jolly there in winter time, near the furnaces. Ah! what larks we used to have; while now—"

"Well! What are you grumbling about now? Whenever you're told off to watch anyone, don't I give you your five francs every morning?"

"Just so. And I find those five francs ain't enough."

"Not enough, indeed!"

"Eh! 'taint worth while for you to get waxy. I ask for a rise and you refuse it. All right; I'm going on strike."

Beaumarchef would willingly have given a fivepenny bit from his own pocket for Mascarot to have heard master Chupin's impertinence. "You're a young rascal!" he cried. "You'll go far with the company you keep. Oh, don't deny it! A fellow named Polyte, with a shiny cap and a pair of Newgate knockers, not to mention a red scarf, came here the other day to ask after you. I'm sure—"

"In the first place," rejoined Toto, "it's no business of yours what company I keep."

"Oh, I say it for your own sake. I give you fair warning you'll come to grief."

This prediction sounded like a threat to Toto. "How?" he answered angrily; "how can I come to grief? Do you mean that Mascarot will interfere? Pshaw! I'd advise him to keep quiet."

"Toto, you young scamp!"

"But, dash it all, you're beginning to play too much of the master. 'Rascal' here, 'scamp' there, 'scoundrel,' 'blackguard,' and so on. I won't stand those names. What are you and the governor, I should like to know? Do you really take me for a fool? Do you think I don't understand your trickery? Do you think I believe all the cock-and-bull stories

you tell me? Come, come, I've eyes, and ears, and brains as well. When you tell me to watch this one or that one for a week or more, it isn't to help them home if they happen to fall. If ever I'm nabbed I know what I shall tell the police, and you'll see then that a good workman is worth more than five francs a day."

Beaumarchef was an old soldier, and a brave man to boot. He was most expert at fencing; but in argument he was easily disconcerted. Toto's surprising impudence led him to believe that the young scamp had been advised by some experienced counsellor; and if that were really the case, it was impossible to calculate the exact meaning of these threats. Not knowing how to act in this emergency, being wholly without instructions, the retired sub-officer judged it best to act prudently. "Come," asked he, "how much do you want?"

"Well! I should say seven francs to begin with."

"The devil you do! Seven francs a day! Upon my word you are cool indeed! Well, well, I'll give them to you to-day, and advise the master to increase your allowance for good; so now you can begin your report."

However, Toto received this conciliatory proposal with unmitigated disdain. "My report?" said he. "Go to blazes for it!"

"Eh! what are you saying?"

"Saying! why, do you think I'm going to open my mouth for your extra two francs? Not for Joe, oh dear no! To begin, I swear I won't say a word till you've handed me a hundred francs!"

"A hundred francs!" answered Beaumarchef, fairly confounded.

"Yes, just that; neither more nor less."

"And why, pray, am I to give them you?"

"Because I've earned them."

Beaumarchef shrugged his shoulders. "You're mad," said he; "your demand is utterly preposterous. Besides, what could you do with so much money?"

"Never you mind that. One thing's certain: I shan't spend it in buying pomade like you do, to put on your moustaches."

Impudent Chupin! he dared to attack those sacred moustaches! and so he was about to receive the kick he so richly deserved, when a noise at the door attracted Beaumarchef's attention. He turned and beheld our old friend Father Tantaine. Yes, Father Tantaine, the worthy old fellow, who looked much the same as on the evening when he befriended Paul in the attic at the Hôtel du Pérou. He wore the same long overcoat, shiny from long usage, and grimed with successive layers of grease and dust. His everlasting smile was on his withered lips. "Tut, tut!" he exclaimed; "what does all this mean? You were getting angry, I think. Never quarrel with the doors open."

In his heart, Beaumarchef thanked the lucky star that had sent him this unexpected reinforcement. He at once indignantly began: "Toto-Chupin, sir, pretends—"

"I have heard every word," interrupted Tantaine in a soft voice.

At this news, Toto thought it best to put some little distance between himself and the old clerk. He was an acute observer, this overgrown Parisian ragamuffin. During the years that he had earned his living in the gutter, necessity had sharpened his natural powers of observation; and, moreover, by dint of having to pick his daily dupes out of the crowd, he had become no mean physiognomist, like all those whose subsistence depends on strangers' whims. Toto-Chupin scarcely knew B. Mascarot,

and distrusted him ; but he thoroughly despised Beaumarchef, rightly judging that his bounce concealed a paucity of brains. At the same time he feared this sweet-spoken Tantaine like fire ; for he recognised in him a spirit that would bear no trifling. He hastened, therefore, to offer his apologies “Just let me tell you, sir,” he said.

“Tell me what ?” interrupted Tantaine. “That you are an intelligent fellow ? I know it. But never mind, you’ll come to a bad end.”

“But, sir, I only wanted—”

“Money ? Ah ! that is but natural ; and, upon my word, you are too useful for us to think of relinquishing your services. Come, Beaumarchef, hand this fine fellow the hundred francs he wants.”

The ex-sub-officer was astounded at this unheard-of generosity, and his lips parted with an objection ; but he was silenced by a gesture, which Toto, however, did not see ; so having unlocked the cash-box, he produced five napoleons and offered them to the young scamp.

Toto looked at the money, then at the faces of the two men, but did not dare take the coins. Suppose they were mocking him ! Suppose there was some snare ! He had been so pressing a moment before, and yet now he was all hesitation.

“Take them,” said Tantaine. “If your information is worthless, I shall reclaim them. And now follow me into the confessional, where we shall not be disturbed.”

The confessional, as it was called in the office, was darkened by green baize curtains, and contained as furniture a small sofa, two arm-chairs, and a table. Tantaine seated himself on the sofa, and, turning towards Toto, who stood twirling his cap in his hands, exclaimed, “I’m listening.”

The young scamp had by this time regained his habitual impertinence ; did he not feel the hundred francs in his pocket ? “Five days ago,” he began, “I was told to watch Caroline Schimmel, and I know her now as well as I know my aunt. That woman, sir’s, a reg’lar clock, and the little drinks she takes, mark the hours.”

Father Tantaine smiled.

“She gets up,” continued Toto, “at ten o’clock in the morning, takes her absinthe, breakfasts at the nearest eating house, sips her coffee, and plays a game of bezique with any one who comes to hand. So much for the day time. Then at six o’clock she goes to ‘*The Turk*’ and stops there till they shut up, when off she goes to bed.”

“‘*The Turk*,’ what do you mean by that ?” asked Father Tantaine.

“What, don’t you know, sir ? that’s how they call the great grub shop in the Rue des Poissonniers—and a fine place it is too. You can eat and drink and dance as much as you like there. It seems it’s awfully swell inside.”

“It seems, do you say ? Haven’t you been in then ?”

Toto pointed disconsolately to his dirty blouse and ragged trousers : “They wouldn’t let me in like that,” said he, “but never mind, wait a bit. I have my plan.”

As they talked, Tantaine took down the address of “*The Turk*. ” When he had finished, he looked up and asked severely, “Well, Toto, do you think this information is worth a hundred francs ?”

“Wait a moment,” answered Toto, making a grimace like a monkey. “Do you think Caroline can live this sort of life without money ? She ain’t a landowner. However, I’ve found out where her money comes from !”

The comparative darkness of the confessional enabled Tantaine to conceal the intense satisfaction these words caused him. "Ah!" he answered, with feigned indifference, "you have learned that?"

"Yes, and several other things besides. Just listen! Yesterday, after breakfast, Caroline began to play cards with two blokes, who had been eating at the next table. As soon as I saw the way they shuffled the cards, I knew they were old hands, and said to myself, 'Hullo, old woman! they are going to clean you out!' I was right, too; for after an hour's play she hadn't even enough coin to pay her score, and offered the landlord one of her rings as security. But he refused to take it, whereupon she rejoins, 'All right; I'll just go to my place, and come back again.' I saw and heard her, for I was at the counter drinking a glass of wine."

"And did she go to her lodgings?"

"Not she! She went out, crossed Paris as fast as a guardsman could walk, and went straight to the finest house in the Rue de Varennes—a perfect palace it was. She knocked at the door, a porter opened it, and then she went in. Of course I waited outside."

"Well, do you know who lives in this house?"

"Of course I do. The grocer at the corner told me it belonged to the Duc de—wait a minute—the Duc de Champdoce; yes, that's the name, Champdoce—a nobleman whose cellars, it seems, are brimful of gold, like those of the Bank of France."

Tantaine was never so indifferent in manner as when he was really interested. "Go on, my lad," said he. "Cut it short."

Toto, who had counted on making a great impression, seemed extremely annoyed on hearing this. "Give me time," he muttered. "Well, in half an hour or so out came Caroline looking awfully lively. A cab passed by; she scrambled in, and off she went. Luckily I've a good pair of legs, and so I reached the Palais Royal just in time to see her go into a money changer's and change a five hundred franc note."

"How did you find out that?"

"By my eyes, of course. The place was all lighted up, and I could see through the window."

Tantaine smiled pleasantly. "You know bank notes, then?"

"Yes, when I see 'em; but I never touched one. It's said they're as soft as satin. One day I went into a changer's and asked the boss just to let me take a thousand franc note in my hands. I only wanted to know what it felt like. But he gave me a box on the ears, and squeaked, 'Clear out!—'you old beast!' says I, 'why do you show such piles of notes in your windows then? Is it to rile poor people?'"

Father Tantaine was no longer listening, "Is that all?" he asked.

"Not quite, I've kept the tit-bit for the finish. Do you know we're not the only folks who are watching Caroline?"

This time Toto had every reason to be satisfied with the effect he produced. The old man started so prodigiously that his hat tumbled off.

"What's that you say?" he exclaimed.

"I say what I've seen, governor. For three days a big chap, with a harp on his back, has been at her heels. I didn't like the look of him at once, and right I was. He followed Caroline to the Rue de Varennes just as I did."

Father Tantaine was reflecting. "A big chap," he muttered. "A musician—hum! Perpignan must have a hand in that, or else I'm greatly mistaken—I must know what it means." Then looking at Toto, he

added. " You must drop, Caroline, my lad, and stick to this harpist. Mind you're prudent. You can go now ; you've earned your hundred francs."

Chupin at once went off, and the old man shook his head. " That lad's too intelligent by half," he muttered ; " he will never make old bones."

Beaumarchef was at this moment opening his mouth to ask Father Tantine to mind the office while he went to change his clothes, but the old clerk forestalled him by remarking " Although the governor doesn't like to be disturbed, I'm going to see him. And when the gentlemen who are expected, come, Beaumar, mind you show them in at once ; for the pear is getting so ripe, so ripe that if it isn't gathered immediately it will fall to the ground and rot."

With these words, Father Tantine walked towards B. Mascarot's private room, and went in without knocking.

XVI.

It was Dr. Hortebize who was the first to arrive at the appointment which B. Mascarot had given to his honourable partners. It was hard indeed for him to rise before ten o'clock in the morning ; but after all, business was business. When he reached the agency, the outer office was full of clients, whereat Beaumarchef rejoiced exceedingly ; for surrounded as he was by applicants, he escaped the doctor's censure respecting his neglected attire, as well as his usual sneer, " You've been at the brandy again, Beaumar."

" M. Mascarot is in his office," exclaimed the ex-sub-officer, as soon as he saw the physician. " He's impatiently waiting for you. Father Tantine is with him."

There was a humourous twinkle in the doctor's eyes, but nevertheless he answered with perfect gravity. " Indeed, I shall be delighted to see the old fellow."

However, on entering the agents sanctum, he found B. Mascarot alone, as usual engaged in sorting those eternal cards of his. " Well," asked Dr. Hortebize, " what's the news ? "

" There's none."

" Haven't you seen Paul ? "

" No."

" Will he come ? "

" Yes."

The estimable agent is generally laconic, but not to this degree.

" What's the matter ? " asked the physician. " Our greeting is absolutely funereal. Are you ill ? "

" I am simply preoccupied, which is excusable on the eve of a decisive battle," answered Mascarot. But he only told part of the truth ; there was something more which he refrained from telling his friend. He was worried about Toto-Chupin. One flaw, and the most solid axle ever forged shivers to atoms. Toto might be the grain of sand which, gliding into the machine, stops its working and renders it worthless. Now, Mascarot was asking himself how he might get rid of that grain of sand.

" Ishaw ! " said the doctor, rattling his medallion as he spoke, " we shall succeed. What is there to fear, after all ? Resistance from Paul ? "

B. Mascarot shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. " Paul will struggle

so little," he answered, "that I have decided he shall assist at our séance to-day, although it will be a stormy one. We might measure out the truth to him like drops of wine to an invalid, but I prefer a full dose."

"The deuce you do! Suppose he should take flight and disappear with our secret?"

"He won't disappear in a hurry!" said Mascarot, in a tone which would have horrified Paul had he been present. "He can't escape from us any more than a cockchafer can free itself from the string a child ties round it. Do you understand those yielding natures like his? He's the glove, and I, the nervous hand underneath."

The doctor did not attempt to discuss the point, but blandly murmured, "Amen."

"If we meet with any resistance," resumed Mascarot, "it will come from Catenac. I may be able to obtain apparent co-operation from him, but not really sincere assistance."

"Catenac!" interrupted the doctor in surprise. "I thought you meant to dispense with his services."

"Yes, that was my idea."

"But why have you changed your mind?"

"Simply because I satisfied myself, that we couldn't deprive ourselves of his services, for if we did, we must admit some other legal man into our confidence, reveal the secret of our partnership, and" he stopped short, listened for a moment, and then exclaimed—"Hark! he's coming now!"

In the passage outside a husky cough could be heard, such a cough as usually overtakes a fat man when he passes from the cold air of the street to the warmer atmosphere of indoors. "Yes, it's he," muttered Hortebize.

At the same moment the door opened, and Catenac appeared. He either naturally possessed or had acquired that air and manner, that *je ne sais quoi* which at first sight elicit the remark, "There goes an honest man!" In fact, his appearance inspired unlimited confidence. Tartufe would not be Tartufe if he had restless eyes, a hard mouth, and a fleeting forehead, for then he would inspire distrust, and distrust is out of keeping with his character. Thus Catenac's glance was frank and open, he always looked you full in the face. His voice too was full and mellow, and he had that jovial easy manner which always produces a favourable impression. At the Palais de Justice he was greatly esteemed for his learning, although he seldom pleaded. If he made some thirty thousand francs a year by his profession as an advocate, it was because he had a specialty. He arranged affairs which people dared not bring into court, lest they and their adversaries were alike consigned to the galleys, or at least dishonoured. Actions of this kind are begun every day in Paris. The most violent of the adversaries institutes proceedings, and the public, sniffing a delightful scandal, impatiently awaits the pleadings. But the matter never comes into court. At the eleventh hour the opponents have consulted some legal adviser of Catenac's description, and everything has been quietly settled. Catenac had over and over again brought rogues to reason, showing them what would be the result of their mutual denunciations. He had effected compromises between murderers quarrelling over their spoils, and had even had a hand in still more foul intrigues. He himself had often said, "My life has been spent amid mud and mire." In his private room, in the Rue Jacob, confessions which ought to have brought down the ceiling had been whispered in his ear.

In conciliation of this kind, the mediator naturally fixes his own terms.

The client who exposes his conscience to him belongs to him as much as the patient to the doctor, as the fair penitent to her father confessor. Thus Catenac's business was a lucrative one. The exercise of his specialty had, moreover, endowed him with a frothy, diffuse redundant style of speech, such as is essential for mediators, who, before aught else, must calm the adverse parties.

"Here I am!" he cried from the threshold. "You summoned me, friend Baptistin, convoked me, called for me, wrote to me, and here I come, all haste, all obedience, all willingness to know what you require, what you want, what I can possibly do for you—"

"Take a chair," interrupted Mascarot, gravely.

"Thanks, dear friend, many thanks—a thousand thanks; but I am in great haste. Very busy, expected on all sides, positively bound, engaged, without a moment to spare; a thousand matters on hand: matters of life and death."

"Well," exclaimed the doctor, "you can sit down all the same. What Baptistin has to say to you is quite as important as any engagement."

Catenac complied with a genial smile, but at heart he was intensely angry, and felt not a little uneasy. "What is it then?" he asked.

Mascarot had risen and bolted the door, and on resuming his seat again, he began. "These are the simple facts: Hortebize and I have decided to launch the great affair which I vaguely spoke to you about some time ago. We have an important man—the Marquis de Croisenois—"

"My dear fellow—" interrupted the advocate.

"Wait a moment. Your co-operation is essential, and—"

Catenac started up. "Enough!" he exclaimed, "sufficient, the cause is heard. If it was to propose, to offer me an affair that you wrote, asked me to call, you did wrong, you made a great mistake; for I have told you, assured you, sworn to you, repeated a hundred times"—He was already turning, hat in hand, fully determined on retreat, but between the door and himself stood worthy Dr. Hortebize, who was looking at him in the most singular fashion.

Catenac was certainly not easily frightened; but Hortebize's attitude was so significant, and Mascarot's frigid smile so threatening, that he was fairly taken aback. "What do you mean?" he stammered. "What do you wish—what can I do for you?"

"We wish, first of all," said the doctor, speaking very slowly and distinctly, "that you should take the trouble to listen when you are spoken to."

"I am listening, I should say."

"Then resume your seat, and open your mind to our friend Baptistin's proposals."

Catenac's face in no wise revealed his impressions. He had so drilled every muscle, and so exercised himself in self-control, that a slap on the face would hardly have brought a drop of blood to his cheeks. However, as he sat down, he made a gesture with his right hand, which showed how irritated he felt at being treated in this fashion. "Well, let Baptistin explain himself," he said.

Mascarot's only movement had been to raise his hand to his spectacles as if to make sure that they were safely on his nose; otherwise he had not stirred. "Before going into details," he said, coldly, "I wish first of all to ask our worthy friend and partner if he is with us or not."

"Why should there be the shadow of a doubt on that point?" interrupted the advocate; "do all my assurances go for nothing?"

"Excuse me; this is not a time for mere assurances. What we now need, is loyalty and active co-operation."

"Can it be, my friends—"

"I ought to warn you," continued Mascarot, without heeding the interruption, "that in the enterprise we are starting on, we have every prospect of success, and if we succeed, it will be to the tune of nearly a million for each of us."

Hortebize, who was not endowed with the agent's patience, now hastily exclaimed, "Come, Catenac, give us your answer is it 'yes' or 'no'?"

Catenac, as his friend suspected, was in a cruel state of indecision. He did not speak for a full minute. He was reflecting. "Well then—'No'!" he suddenly exclaimed, with a violence that betrayed his agitation. "After due consideration and proper study, having reflected and weighed every contingency—I answer you with a square 'No.'"

B. Mascarot and Hortebize ejaculated, "Ah!" at the same moment. It was not so much that they were surprised, they rather experienced that indefinable sensation which comes over a man when he finds his anticipations, even should they be of a redoubtable character, realised.

"Allow me to explain," continued Catenac, "what you will probably call my defection—"

"Say treason—that would be more correct."

"Very well; I won't bandy words. I'll be frank."

"Oh!" muttered the doctor. "That isn't your usual style."

"But it seems to me that I have never concealed my opinion from you. More than ten years ago I spoke to you of breaking off our connection. Do you recall what I said? Do you remember my words? I said to you, 'Only our extreme need, our bitter poverty, justified our acts—now they are inexcusable—'"

"Yes," remarked Mascarot, "I recollect you mentioned your scruples.

"So you see then?"

"Only your scruples have never prevented you from coming regularly to receive your share of the profits."

"That is to say," interrupted the doctor, "you repudiated the risks but accepted the profits. You wished to win money without staking anything."

Although there seemed no possible reply to this argument, it in no way disconcerted Catenac. "It is true," he answered, "I have always received my thirds. But didn't I do quite as much as you towards putting the agency on its present prosperous footing? Doesn't it work now smoothly and noiselessly like a perfect machine? Haven't we succeeded in imparting a commercial aspect to our operations? Every month a handsome profit comes in, without the least exertion, and I, unquestionably, have a right to a third. Let things go on, quietly, at their little jog trot and I'm your man."

"Very kind of you, to be sure," drawled the doctor.

"But now," resumed Catenac, "you talk of drawing me into incalculable dangers and I cry 'Stop.' I'll have nothing to do with all that. I can read in your eyes that you think me a fool. I hope to God that events won't prove to you how much I'm in the right. Just think of it! Chance has favoured us for twenty years. What is needed to make it turn against us? A mere nothing. Believe me, it's never wise to tempt Fortune. Sooner or later she invariably revenges herself on those who, instead of paying court to her in a decorous manner, carry her off perforce."

"Oh, pray, don't let us have any sermons," pleaded Dr. Hortebize.

"All right, I've done. Only, once more, believe me, reflect while there's

yet time. Impunity can't last for ever. Prodigious as your hopes and expectations may be, they are as nothing in comparison with the risks you run."

This cold loquacity was more than the doctor could bear. "It is all very well for you," he exclaimed, "to reason in this way. You are a rich man."

"I have enough to live on, I admit ; apart from what I earn by my profession, I have a couple of hundred thousand francs, and if you can be induced to renounce your projects by sharing this sum with me, you have but to say the word."

B. Mascarot, who all this time had sat in silence, leaving the dispute to the other two, now judged it time to interfere. "Poor fellow," said he, "have you really a couple of hundred thousand francs ?"

"Very nearly at all events."

"And you offer us each a third ! Upon my word, you are very liberal, and we should be most ungrateful if we were not profoundly touched ; only—" He paused, settled his spectacles, and then in a decided tone resumed, "Only if you were to give each of us fifty thousand francs, you would still have more than eleven hundred thousand remaining."

Catenac burst into such hearty laughter that a casual observer would have been thoroughly deceived. "Ah !" said he, "what a pity it isn't true."

"And if I proved to you I was speaking the truth ?" asked Mascarot.

"I should be greatly surprised."

The worthy agent opened a drawer, drew from it a small account book, and handed it to his partner, exclaiming, "Well, look there ; there's an exact statement of your fortune up to the end of last December. Since then you have made various purchases of stocks and shares through M. T——. I have not added them to the total there, but I have a note of them. Shall I show it you ?"

Now, at least, there came some expression into Catenac's hitherto impassive face. He started up with his eyes flashing fire. "Yes," he exclaimed, "you are right. I have precisely the fortune you mention, and for that very reason I don't choose to belong any longer to your association. I have sixty thousand francs a year ; that is, sixty thousand excellent reasons for not compromising myself, and I won't do so—I swear I won't. You are jealous of my success. Of course you are ; but am I to blame for the inequality of our fortunes ? Wasn't I as penniless as you when we began together ? The only difference is, I haven't lived like you. You have been spending money on all sides ; I've been economising. You have only thought of the present, while I have had an eye to the future. Hortebize has done his best to get rid of his clients, while I, on the contrary, have held on to mine, and attracted others besides ; and now, because I am rich and you poor, you insist on my sacrificing everything. This won't do, my friends ; it won't do ! When I reach the goal of my ambition, you expect me to turn back and crawl over the road again with you, do you ? Never ! Go your ways, and let me go mine. I will have nothing more to do with you !"

He had again risen, hat in hand, when a gesture from Mascarot detained him. "Suppose I told you," said the agent, "that your services are indispensable to us ?"

"I should simply say, 'So much the worse for you. '

"But suppose we insist—"

"Insist ? And how, pray ? You hold me ; but I hold you as well. Try to do me harm, and you fall with me !"

"Are you quite sure of that ?"

"So sure of it, that I repeat that from this day forth I will have nothing more to do with you."

"I think you will find yourself mistaken."

"Indeed—and why, pray?"

"Because, for the last year, I have fed and clothed and sheltered a young girl named Clarisse. Do you happen to know her?"

It was not unintentionally that B. Mascarot had allowed his friend Catenac to exhaust himself in struggling as fruitlessly as a fish taken in a net. He wished to learn what were his partner's intentions, and find out what strings he might have to his bow. If he had purposely irritated him and encouraged Hortebize's ironical remarks, it was because he knew right well that an angry man allows his tongue indiscreet freedom. Now, however, being sufficiently enlightened, he had again resumed the reins.

On hearing this name of Clarisse, the advocate had started back, throwing out his arms—his eyes dilated with fright, and his whole frame quivering with a nervous spasm. "Clarisse!" he stammered; "who told you? how can you have learned—"

But the sarcastic smile on the lips of both of his companions lashed his pride so cruelly that he almost instantly regained his self-control. "Upon my word," he said, "I am losing my mind. Why should I ask these men, whom I know so well, how they learned a secret? Haven't they the most infamous methods always at work?"

"I had judged you rightly," remarked B. Mascarot.

"In what respect, pray?"

"I foresaw that the day would come when, considering yourself strong enough to stand alone, you would attempt to break the ties that unite us. To-day you wish to throw us over, and you would betray us to-morrow, if you could do so without danger to yourself. But I am ready for you."

The worthy doctor rubbed his hands together with more than customary earnestness. "That's it," said he; "nothing like being prepared."

"However, one thing I don't understand," continued Mascarot, "and that is, that you, Catenac, a man of more than average intelligence and shrewdness, should have dealt us such a fine hand against yourself. What! It only occurred a year ago; you hated us, longed to betray us, and yet you deliberately went and made yourself vulnerable! Come, it's quite incredible."

"Yes, incredible," repeated the doctor, like an echo.

"And yet your—folly, shall I call it? perhaps imprudence would be the better word—is of the most ordinary description. We see and hear of it every day. Don't you ever read the *Gazette des Tribunaux*? I saw a story in it yesterday; one might swear it was your own. An ambitious, hypocritical man of the middle classes, supposed to be highly respectable and honest, engages a pretty, buxom young girl from the country as his servant, and amuses himself in seducing her. For some months matters go on pretty smoothly; but one fine day the girl finds it impossible to conceal her situation any longer. Our good man is naturally disturbed; for what would the neighbours and the concierge say? Well, to make a long story short, the child is suppressed—yes, suppressed is a good word—and the mother thrown on the streets."

"Baptistin, have mercy!"

"It's a simple thing to do, no doubt, but an awfully imprudent one. These affairs are always found out. If Crime has its combinations and craftiness, Justice has at its service those chances which we always call

incredible, although they turn up at each step in life. You have a gardener at your house at Champigny. Suppose this man took a notion into his head to turn up the earth round the well at the bottom of the garden? Do you know what he would find there?"

"Enough!" muttered Catenac; "I surrender."

B. Mascarot adjusted his spectacles, as he always did in decisive moments. "You surrender, do you? No, not yet. At this very moment you are seeking to parry my blows."

"I assure you—"

"Spare yourself the trouble. If your gardener did as I say he would find nothing at all!"

A cry of rage escaped the advocate. He was beginning to realise what a horrible snare he had fallen into.

"He would find nothing," repeated Mascarot slowly. "And yet, it is nevertheless true, that, one cold night in January last year, you dug a hole in your garden, and in that hole you laid the body of a child, rolled up in a shawl. And what shawl? Why, the very one which you, Catenac, bought for Clarisse, when you were trying to seduce her. You thought that gift would make some impression on her. No doubt it did. However, you bought that shawl at the Bon Marché, and the shopman who sold it you will identify it, if needs be. Well now, go and look for the child and shawl, and you'll find nothing at all."

"Then it was you, you who carried them off?"

"By no means," replied Mascarot, in a tone of condensed sarcasm; "it was Tantaine. I'm not quite so imprudent; but I know where the body is—and you don't. Don't be troubled, however, it is perfectly safe; but one single act of treachery on your part, and the very next day you will find in the morning papers, under the heading, '*Paris*, 'Yesterday, whilst excavating such and such a place, the workmen found the body of a newborn child, which had evidently died a violent death. Active steps are being taken to bring the criminal to justice.' Yes, that's what you'll read; and you know me well enough to be sure, beforehand, that justice will take its course. Besides poor Clarisse's shawl, I've added sufficient to the bundle for the police to find you out with the greatest ease."

Catenac's anger had given way to absolute mental prostration. This man, whom nothing ought to have surprised, seemed as if he were stunned, as if he had lost the power of reflection or deliberation. He did not conceal his despair; indeed, rather the reverse, as if he actually hoped to soften the hearts of his implacable associates.

"You are killing me," he gasped; "killing me at the very moment when I was about to grasp the reward for which I have toiled and stinted myself for twenty years!"

"That word 'toil' is good!" observed the doctor sententiously.

But there was no time to lose. Paul and the Marquis de Croisenois might arrive at any moment, and Mascarot deemed it advisable to revive his demoralised partner. "You complain as if we wished to hang you now and here! Do you suppose for a moment that we are so utterly simple as to expose ourselves to these great perils without an almost absolute certainty of success? Hortebize was almost as disturbed as yourself when I first spoke of this great stroke of business to him. However, I explained it fully, and then he was thoroughly satisfied."

"Thoroughly satisfied," echoed Hortebize.

"I really think," resumed the agent, "that there is nothing whatever to

fear for any one of us—least of all for yourself ; and I trust you won't have any resentment for what has just been said."

"Oh, I'm not angry," answered Catenac with a forced smile. "Tell me what you want me to do."

B. Mascarot reflected for a moment. "What we desire from you," said he, "can in no way compromise you. I want you to draw up an act of partnership on a plan I will tell you by-and-bye. You will have no ostensible connection with the affair."

"Very well."

"But this is not everything. You have been entrusted with a most difficult mission by the Duc de Champdoce. You are engaged in a search—"

"What! you know that too?"

"I am ignorant of nothing which can in any way serve our ends. For instance, I have ascertained that, instead of coming at once to me, you foolishly applied to the only man in the world whom we have any reason to fear—Perpignan, who is almost as clever as we are, and a great deal harder in his terms."

"Go on," said Catenac impatiently ; "what do you expect of me on this point?"

"Very little. You will simply keep me informed as to the progress of your researches, and never say a word to the duc which we have not previously agreed on."

"So be it."

The quarrel seemed to have come to an amicable termination, and worthy Dr. Hortebize looked overjoyed. "Now," said he, insinuatingly, "confess that it was not worth while making as much noise as if you were being flayed."

"I admit I was in the wrong," answered Catenac meekly ; and so saying he held out his hand to his two friends, and then with a wan smile added, "let it all be forgotten."

Was he sincere? A swift glance, exchanged by B. Mascarot and the doctor, was full of suspicion. However, a moment previously, already, a knock had been heard at the door. Hortebize rose to open it, and Paul appeared, bowing with respectful affection to his two protectors. "First, my boy," said B. Mascarot, "let me introduce you to one of my oldest and best friends." And turning to Catenac he added, "I wish to ask your kindness for my young friend. Paul is a good fellow, who has neither father nor mother, and whom we are trying to push on in the world."

At these words, emphasized by a strange smile, the lawyer started from his seat. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "why did you not speak sooner?"

Catenac was the Duc de Champdoce's confidant, and as such he now understood Mascarot's plan.

XVII.

THE Marquis de Croisenois was one of the worst men in the world to keep an appointment. In fact, his lack of punctuality formed part of a system of his, and almost amounted to a mania. Perhaps he thought he might thus assert his own importance ; but in this he was very much mistaken. A man of keen perceptions doesn't trouble himself about being late or early; his only care is to arrive at the very moment when he is expected or desired. To arrive then, and then only, is the secret of many a man's good fortune.

M. de Croisenois had been summoned by B. Mascarot for eleven o'clock ;

but it was past twelve when he at last presented himself, in yellow kids, with a glass in his eye, and carrying a switch-like cane, which he twirled with that air of familiar impertinence that fools assume when they think they are condescending to something very much beneath them. At thirty-five, Henri de Croisenois affected the youthful air of a stripling of twenty. His careless frivolity was his armour, the inevitable excuse for his greatest follies. Folks said of him after each fresh escapade, "He's a scatterbrain, quite a school-boy; but you can't be angry with him, he's so good-natured."

No doubt the marquis laughed at this in his sleeve. This amiable young nobleman had never had a good impulse in his life. He was always exercising himself in resisting his first inspirations. Under his indifferent air he concealed considerable astuteness. He had even nonplussed many a pettifogging lawyer, and had duped the usurers who had lent him money. If he were ruined, it was simply because he had chosen to live in the same style as those of his friends who were ten times as wealthy as himself—by no means a new story.

He was one of that brilliant group of *viveurs*, of whom the Count de Trémorel was long the paragon, and, like his associates, had set up a racing stable—one of the surest plans a man can devise to get rid of his fortune. The frivolous marquis soon found this out, and after resorting to all kinds of expedients, he was about to plunge for the last time, when B. Mascarot offered him a helping hand. He clutched at it as a drowning man might clutch at a bar of red hot iron. However, whatever may have been his anxieties, he still outwardly maintained an air of composure, and on the particular day we are referring to, he entered Mascarot's private office with an easy, jaunty step, and after bowing to the assembled company, exclaimed, "I have kept you waiting, but, 'pon my word, I couldn't help it; my time is really not my own, you know. But here I am at last, and entirely at your disposal; quite ready to wait until you have finished with these gentlemen." Thereupon, having held his lighted cigar between his fingers as he spoke, he began smoking again.

His manner was excessively impudent, and yet the estimable Baptistin by no means looked offended. He didn't even protest against the cigar, although, as his friends well knew, he positively abominated the smell of tobacco. However, strong men are often patient. Something may, in charity, be granted to the simpleton whom one can crush with one's little finger. And, moreover, B. Mascarot had need of Henri de Croisenois. The marquis was an indispensable pawn in his game of chess.

"We were beginning to despair of seeing you," he answered. "I say we, advisedly, for these gentlemen are here on your account."

The marquis did not take the trouble to hide a pout of vexation.

"These gentlemen," continued Mascarot, "are my partners—Dr. Hortebize, M. Catenac, of the Parisian bar, and our secretary," here he designated Paul.

This presentation was delightfully solemn. If M. de Croisenois was annoyed at finding four confidants, when he had only expected to find one, Catenac was furious at discovering that the secrets of the society were to be abandoned to the mercy of a stranger. A secret, be it remembered, is a very subtle thing; it is more volatile than ether, which evaporates no matter how hermetically the phial containing it may be sealed. Even Hortebize, despite of his blind confidence in Mascarot, felt surprised. As for Paul, he stared and listened with all his might.

Mascarot alone retained the imperturbable assurance of a man who, hav-

ing but one object, goes straight towards it like a bullet, crashing through every obstacle, and turning neither to the right nor to the left.

As soon as Croisenois was seated, the agent began. "I don't intend," said he, "to leave you for a moment in uncertainty. Diplomacy would be absurd between such folks as ourselves."

This phrase, and especially the plural "ourselves," struck the marquis as being so extraordinary, that with uplifted brows he drawled, "You flatter me—my dear sir."

If the frivolous marquis had been more attentive, he would have remarked how B. Mascarot's spectacles jerked on his nose—a jerk which plainly implied, "You poor fool." Hottchize always asserted that the honourable agent's spectacles were gifted with the power of speech, and he was right. It is in vain that a man wears glasses with the view of concealing his impressions. Spectacles soon become part and parcel of the wearer, and confess what the eyes they hide would themselves confess were they only seen.

"I must first tell you, Monsieur le Marquis," resumed Mascarot, "that your marriage is now a certainty, providing my partners and myself agree to help you. We are certain of the Count and Countess de Mussidan's assistance: the only point in abeyance is the young lady's consent."

Croisenois shrugged his shoulders with an air of superb conceit. "Oh! there'll be no difficulty about that," he answered. "I can answer for it. Each epoch has its temptations, and I'm expert in those of nowadays. I will promise the finest horses in Paris, a box at the Opera, unlimited credit at Van Kleijn's, and absolute liberty. No young girl could ask for more. Yet, I shall succeed, depend upon it. Of course, I must be presented and backed by some one whom she likes, and who enjoys a certain influence with her parents."

"Do you think the Vicomtesse de Bois d'Ardon would be a suitable patron?"

"I should think so; she is a relative of the count's."

"Very well, then, on the day we decide Madame de Bois d'Ardon will support your pretensions and sing your praises."

The marquis looked triumphant. "All right!" he exclaimed; "that decides the matter."

Paul asked himself if he were quite awake. He had been promised a rich wife, and here was another man who seemed to be cared for in the same way. "These people," he said to himself, "besides keeping an ordinary employment office for servants of both sexes, seem to have a matrimonial agency as well."

Meanwhile the marquis gave Mascarot a questioning glance, as if he were hesitating to say something he had on his mind. "Oh! speak out!" exclaimed the worthy agent; "we are among friends."

"It only remains now, then," resumed the marquis, "to fix the amount of—the—the commission, shall I call it?"

"I was about to broach that question."

"Very well, then. As I have already told you, I will give you a quarter of the dowry; the day after the wedding I will hand you a due bill for that amount."

Paul now thought he had a glimmer of light. "I see," said he to himself; "if I marry Flavia, I must share her dowry with these honest gentlemen. I now understand why they take so much interest in me."

But the offer made by the marquis did not seem to satisfy Mascarot. "No; that will not do."

"Not do? Well, then, I will add to that the amount of my debt to you."

B. Mascarot shook his head, to the great despair of Croisenois, who resumed, "You want a third of the dowry? Well, take it then."

"No," said Mascarot, "it is not a third—no, nor even the half—the entire dowry would not do. You may keep the whole of it, and also the amount of your debt to us, if we can arrange everything as I desire."

"Well, what do you want? For heaven's sake, speak!"

Mascarot assured himself that his spectacles were all right. "I will speak," he answered; "but, first of all, it is absolutely necessary I should give you a brief history of the association I preside."

So far, Catenac and Hortebize had listened without moving, as grave and silent as Roman senators on their curule chairs. They thought they were assisting at one of those comedies which B. Mascarot had accustomed them to—comedies in which the catastrophes varied, although they were always fatal. They took much the same pleasure in listening to the discussion as they would have taken in watching a cat play with a mouse before devouring it. But when B. Mascarot announced that he was about to disclose their dangerous secret, they both started to their feet in mingled anger and dismay. "Are you mad?" they cried together."

B. Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. "Not yet," he answered calmly; "and I beg you to allow me to continue."

"But you have no right—at least," stammered Catenac, "we have a voice in the decision."

"Enough!" exclaimed Mascarot angrily; "I am the head of our society, am I not?" And in a tone of bitter irony he resumed, "Do you think we cannot speak openly before the marquis?"

As the physician and the lawyer sank back in their chairs in a resigned sort of way, Croisenois thought it politic and conducive to his own interests to try and reassure them. "Between honest folks—" he began.

"But we are not honest," interrupted Mascarot; and then, in answer to the marquis's air of stupefaction, he looked him full in the face and added in a crushing tone, "nor are you either!"

This brutal language brought the blood to the marquis's brow. The rules of good society do not allow people to say face to face precisely what they think of each other. He had more than half a mind to show his anger, but policy prevailed; he could not throw away that chance of future wealth which Mascarot offered him; so, bowing his head under the insult, he pretended to regard it as a joke. "Your paradox," he said, "is somewhat rough."

But the worthy agent took no notice of this moral cowardice, which brought a smile to the doctor's lips.

"I shall be obliged to you, Monsieur le Marquis," continued Mascarot, "if you will lend me all your attention;" and then turning to Paul he added, "and you, too, my dear fellow."

There ensued a moment of almost solemn silence, and the buzz of voices in the outer office could be heard through the closed door. If Hortebize and Catenac were confounded, Croisenois was so stupefied that he allowed his cigar to go out, and Paul shuddered in advance. Mascarot seemed utterly transfigured. He had nothing left of his usual benignant look. The sense of power seemed to have added to his height, and his spectacles literally flashed. "My partners and I, Monsieur le Marquis," he began, "have not always been what we are nowadays. Twenty-five years ago we were young, we were honest—all the illusions of our youth were in full

force ; we had that faith which sustains through every trial ; we had the courage which inflames the soldier as he marches to the assault. We lived, all three of us, in a miserable garret in the Rue de la Harpe, and we loved each other like brothers."

"How long ago it was !" muttered Hortebize. "How long ago !"

"Yes, it is long ago," continued Mascarot ; "and yet the lapse of years does not prevent me from seeing things as they were, and my heart aches as I compare the hopes of those times with the realities of to-day ! We were poor then, marquis, very poor ; and yet the world encouraged us with vague promises and approval. The managers of all those establishments consecrated to the development of nascent talent had murmured in the ears of each of us those magic words : ' You will succeed—*tu Marcellus eris !*' "

Croisenois repressed a smile. He did not find the story exciting. "You understand Latin, I see," he said condescendingly.

"I understood it once, at all events. As I was saying, each of us anticipated a brilliant destiny. Catenac had received a prize for his thesis on 'The Transmission of Property.' Hortebize had written an essay on the analysis of poisons that had met with the approval of the illustrious Orfila, and I was by no means without my successes, having just passed my examination for the degree of 'Doctor of Sciences and Letters.' Unfortunately, Hortebize was on bad terms with his family ; Catenac's people were poor ; and I—well, I had no family—I stood alone. We were, therefore, slowly but surely dying of hunger. I was the only one of the three who earned a penny. I prepared pupils for the examinations of Saint Cyr and the Polytechnic School. For thirty-five sous a day I endeavoured to cram the principles of geometry and algebra into the brains of a number of young fellows who poked fun at my rusty clothes and my excessive thinness. Thirty-five sous ! There were three of us to feed, and besides, I had a mistress whom I passionately loved, and who was dying of consumption."

Who would have ever thought that, of that blue-spectacled sphinx, B. Mascarot !

"But to the point," he resumed. "A day came when between us three we could not raise a halfpenny ; and Hortebize had just confessed to me that for lack of substantial food, meat and wine, my poor Marie would die. "Well," cried I, "wait for me, my friends ; I'll find some money somewhere." So saying, and without knowing where I was going, I rushed from the house ! I was half mad ! I asked myself if I had better beg for a few sous, or spring at the throat of the first man I saw and demand his purse ? I wandered along the quays, talking incoherently all the while. All at once I had a gleam of light. I remembered that it was Wednesday, the half holiday of the Polytechnic School, and I said to myself that if I went to the Café Lemblin or the Palais-Royal, I might, no doubt, find one of my old pupils who would, perhaps, lend me a five franc piece. A five franc piece ! It wasn't much, eh, Monsieur le Marquis ? but that day it represented the life of my beloved Marie, the life of my friends, and my own. Have you ever suffered from hunger, Monsieur le Marquis ?"

Croisenois started. No, he had never suffered from hunger ; but how could he tell what the future might have in store for him—for him whose resources were so nearly exhausted that, on the very morrow even, he might have to resign his fictitious prosperity and drop to the foot of the ladder.

"When I reached the Café Lemblin," resumed B. Mascarot, "I did not see a single pupil of the school. The waiter to whom I spoke looked at

me from head to foot with profound contempt, for my clothes were in rags ; but, on learning that I was an under tutor, he condescended to say that the young gentlemen had been there, and were coming back. I said I would wait for them. The waiter asked if I would take anything. I answered, 'No,' and sat down in a corner.

" My brain had been on fire ever since leaving home, but for the moment I was comparatively happy, for I had a gleam of hope. Among the names the waiter had mentioned were those of two young fellows whom I had always found courteous and obliging, and whom I thought I could depend upon in this cruel emergency. I had been waiting some twenty minutes or so, when suddenly the door of the *café* opened and a man entered—a man whose face I should never forget were I to live a hundred years. He was deadly pale ; his features were contracted and his eyes haggard. He was evidently suffering intense agony, either of mind or body. I saw this instantly, and also realised that his sufferings were not caused by poverty. When he dropped, as it were, on the divan, every waiter in the establishment ran to ask what he wanted. In a hoarse voice which the waiters could scarcely understand, he called for a bottle of brandy, and pen, ink, and paper."

It was a true story that Mascarot was telling, and truth makes its mark. None of the agent's listeners dared to say a word as he now paused, and on looking round he noted that even the ever-smiling Hortebize had become gloomy and perturbed.

" The sight of this man," resumed Mascarot, " in some way consoled me. We are so constituted that the grief of others is in some degree a solace to ourselves. It was very evident to me that he was suffering terribly, and I said to myself with unhealthy satisfaction, 'It isn't only the poor who curse their unhappy fates ; the rich have their share of torture too.' However, in the meantime, the waiters had placed the brandy and the writing materials in front of the new comer. He began by pouring out a large glassful of spirit, and swallowed it as if it had been mere water. The effect was sudden and appalling. He turned crimson, as if he were about to have an attack of apoplexy, and seemed all but unconscious for a minute or two. I watched him with intense curiosity ; for it seemed to me as if the voice of conscience whispered that, somehow or other, that man would be connected with my life. There was, it seemed, some mysterious link between us, and a presentiment warned me that his influence would be fatal for my future. Then a fear seized me, and I was tempted to leave the *café* ; but my curiosity was too strong. In the meantime, this man had recovered. He seized the pen, and quickly traced a few lines on a sheet of letter paper. What he wrote did not satisfy him, however ; for he suddenly stopped, lighted a match, and burned the paper. Then he drank another glass of brandy. A second letter proved no more satisfactory than the first one ; for he crumpled it up and slid it into his waistcoat pocket. However, he began again for the third time, and as I watched him, I saw him hesitate, then write a word, then erase one, then add another, as if he were preparing the rough draft of some communication, each expression of which required careful study. He had plainly lost all recollection of where he was ; for he gesticulated, and let occasional incoherent remarks escape him, as if he were in the privacy of his own office. At last, however, he seemed satisfied with the draft he had drawn up, and proceeded to copy it out on a fresh sheet of paper. This only took him a minute or so, and then, tearing the draft into tiny pieces, he flung them under the table.

Having carefully sealed and directed his letter, he summoned one of the waiters and exclaimed, ‘Take these twenty francs, and carry this letter to its address. Bring me the answer—for there will be one—to my house. Here’s my card; come, make haste.’

“The waiter hastened off, and the gentleman settled his score and then immediately retired. I asked myself what drama it was that I had just witnessed? I divined that this must have some connection with one of those dark intrigues carried on in private life. This man might be a disfavoured husband, a ruined gamester, or a father whose son had just disgraced his name. I tried to think of something else, but all in vain! The little bits of white paper scattered under the table fascinated me. I burned to pick them up, collect them together, and know— But as I said before, at that time I was honest and honourable, and such an act shocked all my instincts. I should, no doubt, have conquered temptation, but for one of those trifling circumstances which often decide a man’s whole life. A door was opened, and the draught wafted one of these scraps of paper to my very feet. I was dazed and conquered. I stooped, picked the paper up, and at once deciphered these four words: ‘*Blow out my brains.*’

“I was not mistaken, then. I was in presence of some terrible enigma, with the means, moreover, of discovering its meaning. After yielding to this first temptation I was lost, and struggled no longer. The waiters passed to and fro, but no one paid the smallest attention to me, and so I quietly glided to the chair where that man had sat, and, unperceived, obtained possession of two more scraps of paper. On the first of them I read: ‘shame and horror,’ and on the second: ‘this very night—one hundred thousand francs.’

“I had it all now. The secret was mine. These imperfect phrases were clear as daylight to me. You may ask why I troubled myself any further. I don’t know; but, at all events, I certainly succeeded in finding every scrap of that letter. I fitted them all together, and then read as follows: ‘Charles,—I must obtain this very night one hundred thousand francs, and you are the only person to whom I can apply, without making the shame and horror of my position public. Can you get this sum together in a couple of hours? My fate depends on your answer—“yes,” or “no;” for I shall either be saved, or else I must blow out my brains.’

“You are probably astonished, Monsieur le Marquis, by the precision of my memory. Nevertheless, you ought to know that there are some things one never forgets; and at this very moment I can see that scrawl before my eyes, with its erasures, blots, and very commas. But I must continue. Below these few lines ran the signature—a well-known commercial name, almost a celebrated one. He who bore it, one of the worthiest of men, found himself momentarily unable to cope with some financial difficulty, such as often imperil a man’s life and honour.”

B. Mascarot paused for a moment, as if overwhelmed by his recollections. But still no one thought of speaking, and as for the brilliant Croisenois, he had long since thrown down his cigar.

“I can assure you,” at last resumed the agent, “that my discovery disturbed me greatly. I forgot all my own anxieties and thought only of his. Wasn’t our anguish of the same kind—he at a loss for a hundred thousand francs—and I for a hundred sous? By degrees, however, as the consciousness of my own bitter misery returned, I was seized with an infernal temptation. Might I not be able to turn this stolen secret to account? The idea was an inspiration. I rose, went to the *comptoir*, and asked for some wafers

and a directory ; then, having returned to the table, I affixed my scraps of paper to a fresh sheet, looked for the merchant's address in the directory, and left the café. This unfortunate man lived in the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin. For more than half an hour I walked up and down in front of his handsome house. Was he still alive ? Had this friend of his, this Charles, answered yes ? At last I decided to go in. A footman in livery abruptly told me that his master did not receive any one at that hour ; besides, he was at dinner with his family. This lackey's impertinent mien fairly exasperated me. 'Well,' said I, 'if you wish to avoid a great misfortune, just go to your master and tell him that a poor devil has brought him the draft of the letter he just wrote at the Café Lemblin.' Indignation made my voice so imperious that the servant never thought of hesitating. The effect of the announcement must have been terrible ; for the footman returned almost at once with a startled look and exclaimed, 'Come quick ! My master is waiting.'

"He conducted me to a large, tastefully decorated study, where I perceived the gentlemen I had already seen at the café. He was deadly pale, and looked at me in a threatening manner. For myself, I could hardly speak ; I was half stifling. 'You picked up the scraps of the draft I had thrown away ?' he asked. I nodded assent, and at the same time showed him the fragments wafered to the sheet of letter paper. 'What do you want for that ?' he rejoined. 'I will give you a thousand francs.' I swear to you, gentlemen, that up to that moment I had no intention of selling this secret. In going to see this man, I had simply meant to say, 'I bring you this paper ; some one else might have taken advantage of it. I have rendered you a service ; in return, lend me fifty or a hundred francs.' This, as I tell you, was what I intended to say ; but seeing how he interpreted my conduct, the blood rushed to my head, and I retorted, 'I want two thousand francs.' Thereupon he opened a drawer, took two notes from a pile of others, and, throwing them in my face, exclaimed, 'Here, scoundrel, pay yourself !'"

B. Mascarot expressed himself with extraordinary vehemence. No one would ever have supposed that this man, usually so calm and self-possessed, could become so excited. His usually unctuous, honey-toned voice now rang like a bugle blast through the room. He seemed no longer to be telling a story. Perhaps he was pleading for extenuating circumstances in favour of a lost cause—his own, trying to exculpate himself in the eyes of his associates, to excuse, if not rehabilitate himself before the tribunal of conscience. Paul and Croisenois trembled with apprehension as they listened to him.

"I cannot express to you," resumed the agent, "how bitterly I resented this undeserved insult. I certainly lost all self-control. I was no longer myself, and if I had committed a crime there and then, God knows I should not have been truly responsible for it. I was, indeed, on the point of committing one. The man I speak of could never have seen death so near before. On his desk there lay a long Catalan knife, used by him for cutting paper, no doubt. I snatched it up, and I was about to strike, when the thought of Marie, dying of cold and starvation, withheld my arm. I threw down the weapon, and rushed out of the house half insane. I had held my head high on entering that cursed mansion ; I had felt proud of my honest poverty ; but now I came away dishonoured."

With the exception of Paul, all the men assembled in Mascarot's office were well acquainted with the dark side of life ; the mire of civilisation

had soiled their minds, familiarity with evil had steeled them against sensibility, and yet they could not help shuddering as they listened to this narrative.

"Let me proceed," continued Mascarot. "Once in the street, the two bank notes I held seemed positive instruments of torture. It seemed to me as if they burned my fingers. I ran with them to the office of a money-changer, who must have taken me either for a madman or a murderer. Why he did not have me arrested, I have never been able to understand. Perhaps I frightened him. At all events he changed the notes, giving me not gold—for gold, in 1843, was rare—but two heavy bags, each containing a thousand francs in silver. Thus burdened, I regained our miserable garret in the Rue de la Harpe. Hortebize and Catenac were waiting for me with inexpressible impatience and anxiety. You must remember that day, my friends. You knew that we were absolutely without a sou. You had seen me go out in a state of desperation; and it was I who, so far, had sustained your courage. You saw that I was utterly distracted by the thought of losing the woman I loved better than life itself; and you asked each other if, in crossing the bridges, I should have courage enough to resist the temptation of suicide, if I should be able to restrain myself from plunging into the Seine, and thus ending my misery. On my return, as soon as my friends perceived me, they rushed to meet me, overjoyed to see me again, but I roughly repelled them. 'Keep back,' I said; 'leave me to myself! I am no longer worthy of your companionship; but, at all events, here is money!' and, so saying, I threw the bags on the floor; one of them burst open, and the silver rolled forth on every side. Marie started up on her pallet, raising her arms in astonishment. 'Money!' she cried. 'Money! We shall have food, then—and I shall live!'

"In those days, Monsieur de Croisenois, my friends were very different to what you see them now. They started back in horror. They were convinced I had committed a crime. 'No, not a crime,' I said bitterly; 'at least, none that the law can reach. This money may be the price of our honour, but no one will ever know it but ourselves!' None of us slept that night, marquis; but when daylight surprised us round a table covered with bottles, we, whom the difficulties of life had vanquished, we had unanimously declared war against Society, we had sworn we would attain fortune by fair means or foul; our association was decided on, its main features already planned."

XVIII.

As Mascarot was desirous of leaving Paul and Croisenois under the strongest possible impression, he now rose from his seat and walked up and down the room. If his intention had been to startle his hearers, he had unquestionably succeeded. Paul was actually breathless, and Croisenois, although he tried to struggle, was quite at a loss for one of those jocular remarks which, in such circumstances, pass as evidence of strength of mind. He understood very well that there must be some connection between this narrative and his own business with Mascarot; but what this connection was, he was wholly at a loss to divine. As for Catenac and Hortebize, who thought they fully understood their dear Baptiste, they exchanged surprised and anxious glances, as if asking each other, "Has he been speaking in all good faith, or is this but the prologue of some comedy, the sense of which escapes

us?" With B. Mascarot, indeed, it was difficult, if not impossible, to divine exactly his object or intentions.

However, the agent seemed quite indifferent to the effect he had produced. Returning to his desk, he adjusted his spectacles in his usual style, and the others were able to see that his features, all aglow with hatred and anger a moment before, had now regained their habitually placid expression. "I hope, marquis," said he, "that you will excuse this long but indispensable preface, which you may think sensational enough for a novel. Now, let us turn to the practical question."

Knowing how much weight the attitude of a speaker imparts to his words, Mascarot again rose, and stationed himself erect with his back to the fire. His spectacles certainly concealed his eyes; but his whole person seemed charged like an electric battery with magnetic fluid, and he commanded absolute attention as he spoke.

"On the night I speak of," he resumed, "we—my friends and I—broke loose from all obligations of honour and morality, and shook off all the shackles of duty. As for the plan which leaped, as it were, complete from my brain, I can expose it in no better terms than those I used twenty years ago when explaining it to my friends. You know, marquis, that as summer advances, there is scarcely a cherry without its worm. The finest ones, the largest and reddest, the freshest in appearance, are precisely those which, when opened, show the worm within. Just so, in the highest circles of a city like Paris, there is not one family—I say not one, and use the term advisedly—that, however prosperous and wealthy it may seem, however fair to look upon, has not some guilty secret, some shameful mystery and wound concealed beneath the surface. Now, suppose a man gained possession of all of these secrets? Would he not be master of the world? Would he not be more powerful than the most powerful monarch? Would he not be able to manage everything according to his own fancies and interests? Very well, then, I said to myself that I would be that man."

Ever since the origin of the Marquis de Croisenois' connection with Mascarot, he had had shrewd suspicions of the nature of the agent's operations. "You are describing an elaborate system of blackmailing!" he exclaimed.

B. Mascarot bowed low with an ironical smile. "Precisely, marquis. It is precisely what is called blackmailing. Relatively speaking, the word may be a new one, but the thing itself is doubtless as old as the world itself. The first day that a man, discovering some infamous act committed by a fellow creature, threatened him with exposure unless he submitted to certain demands, was the day that blackmailing was invented. If all that is old ought to be respected, then blackmailing surely should not be repudiated. How did the divine Aretino, who so proudly called himself the scourge of princes, earn his living, if you please? Why, he levied blackmail on kings! And what kings? Why, Francis the First to begin with, and his great rival the Emperor Charles to boot. However, we live in democratic times, and content ourselves with levying blackmail on the people—or, I should say—on every one possessed of means."

The avowal was so cynically impudent that a flush came to Croisenois' cheeks. "Oh! monsieur!" he protested. "Oh! monsieur!"

"Pshaw!" answered Mascarot, with a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders, "are you afraid of a word? Who hasn't done more or less of this same blackmailing? Look at yourself. Don't you remember that night this very winter, when you caught a young foreigner cheating at cards at

your club. You said nothing to him or any one else at the time ; but you found out that he was possessed of means, and you called on him the next day and borrowed ten thousand francs. When do you intend to return them ? ”

Croisenois fell back helplessly in his chair. “ Horrible ! ” he murmured. “ Prodigious ! ”

But Mascarot had already resumed speaking. “ I know,” said he, “ at least two thousand persons in Paris who have no other means of support than blackmail. I have studied them all—from the low-born convict who extorts money from his former companion in prison, up to the swell who drives a tandem, and who, because chance has acquainted him with the frailty of some unfortunate woman, compels her to give him her daughter in marriage. If ever, one day on the boulevards, you should see the Prince de Salorge encounter Jailesac—the man on change who has such a villainous reputation that I wouldn’t even bow to him—just keep your eyes open ; you will see the prince, who is one of the proudest men I know of, walk straight up to that miserable defaulter and shake hands with him most cordially. Now why does he do that ? Ah ! I haven’t been able to find out ; but I am convinced that in all this there is some secret which would be worth at least a hundred thousand francs. I know a commissionnaire in the Rue de Douai, who in five years amassed a comfortable little fortune. Guess how. When he was trusted with a letter to take it anywhere, he invariably opened and read it. If it contained a single compromising line he pounced down upon the writer. There is scarcely a business enterprise without its parasites—skilful fellows who have discovered something which will not bear the light, and who consequently are paid to keep silence. I know one honourable society, the directors of which having once broken their statutes, are compelled to pay a yearly pension to a scoundrel decked with foreign orders, because he holds the proofs of their culpability. All these matters, it is necessary to say, are negotiated with the utmost care and secrecy, for in regard to blackmailing the police are alert, and the French courts extremely severe.”

B. Mascarot apparently desired to thrill his hearers with every note in the gamut. At the words “ courts ” and “ police,” they fairly shivered from head to foot, and Hortebize and Catenac alarmed at the turn their partner’s narrative was taking, tried by sign and gesture to induce him to discontinue. But Mascarot paid no heed to them, nor even troubled himself concerning his protégé, Paul, although the latter looked fairly frightened out of his wits. To all appearance the agent was only interested in M. de Croisenois’ demeanour, for leaving the others on one side he repeatedly addressed him by his title as if speaking for him alone. “ Our beginnings, marquis,” he resumed, “ were by no means examples of finished skill. For a long time, too, we were sowing our crops and you come in just as we are about to reap our harvests. Fortunately, the professions chosen by Catenac and Hortebize were admirably adapted to further our operations ; the former had become an advocate and the latter a medical man. Catenac dealt with the wounds of the purse, Hortebize with those of the body. You can easily understand that in their respective professions they naturally became acquainted with many secrets. As for myself, the head of the association, it was, of course, impossible for me to remain a mere looker-on with folded arms. But then what could I do ? There were several alternatives, but I was undecided, and for several weeks I discussed the question with myself. Our funds were diminishing, however, a determination be-

came urgent, and I at last decided to rent these rooms and establish and employment agency. I rightly considered that such a modest occupation would attract little or no attention. In other respects also, my provisions were correct, as the result has proved, and as my friends will tell you."

Hortebize and Catenac nodded affirmatively.

"At our epoch," continued the agent, "and with our manners and customs, it is certain that servants exercise very great influence and possess considerable knowledge of everything that transpires in their masters' households. It would be too long to inquire into the why and wherefore, but it is clear that the rich man in his private mansion in the midst of his servants is as strictly watched as any condemned criminal. Nothing he does escapes the curiosity of his menials. His words, looks, and gestures, are noted, weighed, and analysed. He cannot hide a thought, much less an act, for a mere week. The very secret he confides to his wife in the depth of night, with closed doors and his lips close to her ears, is more or less discovered."

The Marquis de Croisenois who, in default of another alternative had now resigned himself, was pleased to smile. "I know that," he murmured.

"Quite so," replied B. Mascarot. "You must have considered all this, for you have never taken a servant from our office."

"Oh, I'm so lucky in that respect."

"I'm aware of it. You have unique servants, improbable ones, men who refuse gold when it's offered to them. But, do you think for a moment that I am kept in ignorance of your acts? By no means. At this moment and is it prudent? you have a valet whom you literally know nothing about."

"Oh! Morel was recommended to me by an intimate friend, Sir Richard Wakefield!"

"Indeed! But this does not prevent me from doubting him. However, more of this on another occasion. Now to return to the subject^c in hand. As I was telling you, I conceived the idea of utilizing the immense power which servants now-a-days possess. I determined to condense it, as it were, like vapour, and then to employ it as we might decide! And it is precisely this I have done. This insignificant office is really the centre of a stupendous spider's web, which has cost me twenty years of patient labour, but which involves entire Paris in its ramifications. "I may stay here before the fire, but eyes and ears are at work for me in all directions. The police spend millions in fees to their agents, while I, without loosening my purse strings, have an army of faithful labourers. Every day I receive at least fifty servants of both sexes. Count for yourselves how many that would make at the end of the year. And while the agents of the police are compelled to hover round the houses they wish to watch, mine are inside, with far greater facilities for studying the interests, passions and intrigues of their masters and mistresses. And this is not everything. Through the employés, book-keepers, and cashiers, for whom I find situations, I have a foothold in the commercial world, whilst the waiters whom I supply to the restaurants, keep me acquainted with whatever transpires in the most secluded of private rooms."

It was in a tone of intense personal satisfaction that B. Mascarot explained the working of his machinery. His very spectacles glittered with joy.

"But don't imagine for a moment," he resumed, "that all these people are in my secret—by no means! The greater part of them are totally unaware of what they are doing, and in this is my great strength. Each of

them brings me a thread, and I twist the cord which binds my slaves. They come here and talk. They are malicious and indiscreet, that is all ; we listen, sift, and piece and patch together all the information they bring, so that each evening I have more than one useful entry to make in my notes-books. The people who serve me in this unsuspecting manner, remind me of those strange Brazilian birds whose presence is an infallible announcement of a subterranean spring. Wherever one of them sings, the thirsty traveller may dig, and he will surely find the water he seeks. My birds in like manner reveal to me the existence of a secret. It is then my business to dig. I set my special agents to work, we search and find. And now, marquis, I think you will understand the nature and object of our association ? ”

“ I may add,” insisted Dr. Hortebize, “ that it has some years brought us in more than two hundred and fifty thousand francs.”

If Monsieur de Croisenois disliked long stories, he was by no means insensible to the eloquence of figures. He was too familiar with the life of Paris not to understand that by throwing his net every day into troubled waters, Mascarot was bound to catch many fish—that is, acquire large sums of money. And this conviction having entered his mind, it did not require much urging to induce him to look favourably on the project. So with a most winning expression, he now asked, “ And what must I do to earn the protection of the society ? ”

B. Mascarot was too acute not to at once perceive the drift of this question. If his lengthy explanation had obtained only this result, he would have considered it justified ; but there was more than this. Paul, chilled with dismay at first, had gradually recovered his equanimity as he realised the power of the men who had taken his future in hand. He lost sight of the infamy of the speculation in his admiration of Mascarot’s ingenious combinations.

“ Now, Monsieur le Marquis,” resumed the agent, “ so far we have sailed fairly. It may seem to you that we have been rash, but in reality we have been exceedingly cautious and prudent. We have managed our people properly—we have driven none of them to extremities. We have never worried an insolvent vassal, we have granted time to those who were momentarily hard up. I sell secrets by instalments, as Jew dealers sell furniture. And, besides, we have not always demanded money. Catenac has secured comfortable berths for several of his relatives. Hortebize has obtained numerous gratifying satisfactions, and I myself have not disdained the little perquisites of self-love. No man is perfect. However, lucrative as our profession may be, marquis, we are beginning to tire of it. We are growing old, my friends, and I—and we need repose. We have, therefore, made up our minds to retire ; but we wish, first of all, to turn to account everything we have left on hand. I possess an enormous mass of documents of all kinds, but they are, generally speaking, of a most delicate nature ; and in many instances it would be difficult to obtain the real value they represent. However, I count on your assistance.”

At this declaration Croisenois turned pale. What ! Was he expected to go about like some highway robber, armed with compromising letters, in lieu of pistols, to say to men whom possibly he knew, “ Your purse, or your honour ! ” He had no objection to sharing the profits of an ignoble traffic, but he scarcely cared to pull the chesnuts out of the fire. “ Never ! ” he exclaimed, hastily ; “ no—never. You must not count on me.”

His indignation seemed so sincere, and his determination so firm and

decided, that Hortebize and Catenac exchanged anxious looks. But a glance at Mascalot reassured them.

The agent simply shrugged his shoulders and adjusted his spectacles. "No nonsense, if you please, sir," he said, sternly. "Wait before you show so much decision. I told you that my documents were of a special nature, and this is why. One of the greatest difficulties we have to contend with is, that we often stumble across married people who, although they are wealthy, have not the free disposal of their own fortunes. Husbands say, it is quite impossible to take ten thousand francs from my fortune without the knowledge of my wife. Women say, I can only procure money through my husband. And both are sincere. I have seen many of them grovelling at my feet when they knew me to be the possessor of some blasting secret. They have said to me, 'Have mercy—I will do all you wish. You shall have even more than you ask if you will only find some pretext that will enable me to obtain the money.' Now I have sought for some suitable pretext of the kind, and have found it in an industrial society which you will start before the month is over."

"Upon my honour!" remonstrated the marquis, "I really don't see—"

"I beg your pardon, you see perfectly well. A husband who can't give us five thousand francs without destroying all his domestic peace, will give us ten thousand when he can say to his wife, 'It is an investment.' And many a wife who has not a penny herself will induce her husband to bring us the sum we [demand]. And now, what do you think of the idea?"

"I think it excellent; but in what respect am I indispensable?"

"In the sense that we need a suitable person at the head of this company."

"But yourself?"

"Are you jesting, marquis? Do you imagine that I, the head of a mere employment office, can have weight enough to start such a company as I suggest? I should be laughed to scorn. Hortebize, a physician, and, worse still, a homœopathist, would fare no better. Catenac, of course, is barred by his position and profession from all such speculations; still, he will be our legal adviser. Now, to begin with the smallest possible chance of success, the company must at least appear to be serious."

The marquis was embarrassed. "But I really see in myself," said he, "none of the qualities requisite for a financier or speculator."

"You are really very modest. In the first place, you have your title and your name; these, I am quite ready to admit, signify very little in our own eyes, but they would have a great effect upon the masses. Are there not companies which pay, and pay well, for the names and titles they print at the head of their prospectuses?"

"But my position is singularly unfortunate, from a financial point of view."

"It is, on the contrary, excellent. Before starting on this enterprise you can pay all your debts, and when that's done the world will conclude that you are possessed of a very large capital. The fortune left by your brother, so depreciated at present, will acquire enormous importance. Your marriage with Mademoiselle de Mussidan will set you on a pinnacle. What more do you want?"

"My reputation is detestable; I am called frivolous and extravagant!"

"So much the better. The day you issue the prospectus of your society there will be a general laugh. Men will say to each other, 'What do you think Croisenois is up to now? What on earth has put it into his head to go

into business?" However, you can afford to let folks laugh. You will have Mademoiselle Sabine's dowry of a million, besides your share in the profits of the enterprise."

What a prospect for a man to whom existence was a problem he was called upon to solve each morning!

"Suppose I agreed to accept this proposal," he asked, "how would the comedy end?"

"In the most simple way in the world. When all the stock is sold you will quietly lock the door and let things take care of themselves."

Croisenois started up. "That is to say," he exclaimed, "you mean to sacrifice me entirely. You wish to send me to the galleys!"

"How ungrateful he is," answered Mascarot blandly, "when I am doing my very best to keep him from going there."

"Sir!"

But Maitre Catenac now intervened. Not being able to keep clear of the net himself, it was his interest to aid Mascarot as much as possible. "You do not understand, my dear sir," he said to Croisenois. "Haven't you ever heard of limited liability companies? Now, listen to me. Tomorrow call upon a notary. Tell him you wish to make an appeal to intelligent capitalists for the development of some enterprise or another—say the sale of Pyrenean marble, if you like. However, you open your subscription list, which will be immediately filled up by Baptistin's clients. When these funds are in our hands, what then? We will take care to reimburse all strangers who buy our stock, and we will write to the others, those whose secrets we hold, that the thing has been a failure—that we are ruined, in short—that the capital is lost. Now, Baptistin will have obtained from each of his people a discharge in full, so that the thing will blow over quietly, and you will in no wise be troubled."

The marquis listened, and thought for a moment. "But, gentlemen," he exclaimed, "all those who subscribe under compulsion must necessarily know that I have behaved dishonourably."

"Of course—"

"They would despise me."

"Necessarily—but they would never dare to let you see it. And appearances are enough, are they not? Who would have thought you so difficult—and, between ourselves, who is really esteemed and respected now-a-days? No one. Consideration is only surface deep, and it is really not worth while to go deeper."

The clever marquis still hesitated. "And are you sure of your clients?" he asked at last. "Are you certain there are enough of them to make the operation worth the trouble, expense, and risk we should run?"

B. Mascarot was precisely waiting for this question in order to strike the last blow. "My calculations are all made," said he, "and they are exact." As he spoke he took from his desk a bundle of those slips of card which he spent his life in arranging. "I have here," he resumed, "the names of three hundred and fifty persons who will each turn ten thousand francs into the concern."

"Good heavens! Why, that would make three millions and a half."

"You are quick at figures, I see. However, you might like to know the nature of my weapons. Well, then, just listen; I will take the first ones that come." So saying he shuffled up the cards, and drawing one at hazard from the pack, began to read. "N_____, civil engineer. Five letters addressed by him to the wife of the gentleman who secured him his present

lucrative post, and who can deprive him of it at a moment's notice. Good for fifteen thousand francs.

"P——, merchant. Positive proof that his last failure was fraudulent, and that he concealed two hundred thousand francs from his creditors. He will bleed to the extent of twenty thousand francs.

"Madame V——. Her photograph in too scanty a costume. Poor, but will pay three thousand francs.

"Madame H——. Three letters of her mother's, leaving no doubt that the latter was guilty of frailty before marriage. Letter from a midwife as corroborative testimony. Madame H—— manages her husband, and must be made to pay ten thousand francs.

"L——. A song, which is both impious and obscene, in his own handwriting and signed in full. Two thousand francs.

"S——. Head clerk in the —— Company. Draft of an agreement specifying the private commission to be paid to him on a certain contract. Also a cooked account of his. Can be made to pay fifteen thousand francs.

"X——. Part of his correspondence with L—— in 1848. Three thousand francs.

"Madame M. de M——. A true account of her adventures with Monsieur J——."

This was more than sufficient to satisfy M. de Croisenois. "It's enough," he interrupted; "I surrender. Yes, I bow to your mysterious power, which is more formidable than that of the police."

"And far more serious too," added excellent Dr. Hortebize. "We have never examined our operations from that point of view. However, do nothing contrary to the law, to loyalty and faith, and blackmail won't be levied on you. So you see blackmailing, after all, is a means of moralisation."

The Marquis de Croisenois was too disturbed to appreciate the doctor's banter. He turned towards B. Mascarot and curtly exclaimed, "I await your orders, monsieur."

As usual, B. Mascarot won the day. He had successively conquered the Count de Mussidan, Paul Violaine, and Catenac, and now he had the marquis at his feet.

A dozen times during this discussion Croisenois had been tempted to refuse his co-operation, but each time the words had died away on his lips; for he had realised that he was in the power of this strange man with the cynical laugh and contemptuous air, who probably knew far more of his private life than the one dishonourable transaction he had named.

Now, the marquis had enough peccadilloes on his conscience to quiver under the look riveted on him through those blue spectacles—a look which he realized was as keen as that of a judge questioning a criminal. His vanity unquestionably suffered from the humiliating dependence in which he found himself, and the few drops of honest blood left in his veins curdled at the thought of his position. But, on the other hand, he was dazzled by this mysterious power, now for the first time revealed to him, and was stimulated to acquiescence by the thought that he would henceforth fight the battle of life associated with men of such unquestionable strength and nerve. At first he had fancied that he was to be sacrificed, but the evidence that their interests were one had reassured him. All these considerations had induced him to speak these words, which, an hour earlier, would have burned his haughty lips, "I await your orders!"

This humility was needless. Only the inexperienced allow the full weight

of their tyranny to be felt. B. Mascarot was not inexperienced, and he knew that, while a conquered man may forget his defeat, he never forgives a gratuitous insult. It was, therefore, with perfect courtesy that he replied, "I have no orders to give, sir. Our interests are equal, and we must deliberate together and act in concert before we can decide on the most suitable measures."

Croisenois bowed, grateful for this unexpected politeness succeeding so much brutality.

"It is useless for me," resumed B. Mascarot, "to show you the advantage of your resolution. You wrote to me the other day that you were at the end of your resources, and I know that you have nothing to expect in the future."

"Allow me, I have the property of my poor brother George, who disappeared so strangely."

B. Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. "As you are now one of us, my dear marquis," said he, "let me assure you that frankness between us is altogether desirable."

"I don't see," answered the marquis, with an air of surprise, "how I am wanting in frankness."

"Why the deuce do you talk to us of this mythical fortune?"

"It is not mythical, sir; it exists, and is of considerable amount."

"We know that. It can be fixed at about twelve or fourteen hundred thousand francs."

"Well, then, can't I obtain it? Articles 127 and 129 of the Code Napoleon—"

He stopped short, for he noticed an expression of ill-restrained amusement on Dr. Hortebize's face.

"Don't talk such nonsense," said Mascarot. "When it was merely a question of filing a declaration of absence and obtaining provisional leave to receive the income, you did everything you could; but your situation has changed, and latterly you have secretly done your utmost to prevent the capital from being handed over to you."

"What! Do you suppose—"

"Tut, tut! You did well. You have anticipated and discounted and rediscounted that fortune to such an extent that it would never suffice to pay your creditors. If it were placed in your hands to-morrow, your credit would be gone in four-and-twenty hours; but as long as it remains where it is you can use it as a bait to allure your tradespeople."

Croisenois was a true gamester. Finding that Mascarot was well acquainted with his little dodge, he laughed the matter off, impudently exclaiming, "A fellow does what he can, you know."

Mascarot had now reseated himself in his easy chair. His animation had left him, and he seemed overcome with fatigue. "It would be cruelty, marquis," he said in a weary voice, "to detain you longer. We will see each other again shortly, and arrange our plans in detail. In the meantime Catenac will draw up the scheme of the company and drill you in the financial ways and language you will need to be acquainted with."

Was this a dismissal? M. de Croisenois and the lawyer evidently took it as such, for they at once rose, and after shaking hands with Mascarot and the doctor, and bowing to Paul, they departed together, like two old friends, rather than acquaintances of a couple of hours' standing.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Mascarot revived. "Well Paul," he asked, "what do you think of all you have heard?"

With soft and pliable natures impressions may be both keen and deep, but not lasting. After being almost overwhelmed by emotion, Paul, although still a little pale, had now recovered his sangfroid. He had almost succeeded in stifling the qualms of conscience, and advised by vanity, thought of adopting a cynical tone worthy of his honourable patrons. "I think," he answered, in a fairly steady voice, "that you need me. So much the better. I am not a marquis, but I will obey you without beating about the bush like M. de Croisenois."

Paul's words in no way surprised Mascarot; but did they please him? It was difficult to tell. A skilful observer would have detected on his face, generally so impassive, indications of a contest between two absolutely opposite sentiments—lively satisfaction and intense annoyance. As for Dr. Hortebize, he was simply wonder-struck at the cool audacity of this neophyte, who was in some measure his pupil. The exact meaning of the scene which had taken place now flashed into his mind, and he struck his forehead with the astonishment of a man who wonders that so simple a matter could have hitherto escaped his comprehension. "What a fool I am!" he thought to himself. "Baptistin was not really addressing himself to the Marquis de Croisenois, but to Paul. What a wonderful actor he is! With what astonishing dexterity did he measure each word, so that it might silence remorse or awaken cupidity in this vain young fellow's facile nature."

In the meanwhile Paul was disturbed by his protector's silence. If at first he had been horrified at finding himself in the hands of this extraordinary man, he now trembled at the idea of being abandoned by him and left to his own resources. "I am waiting, sir," he said at last.

"And for what, pray?"

"For you to tell me on what conditions I may make a name for myself, win a fortune, and marry Mademoiselle Flavia Rigal, whom I love."

Mascarot smiled, and a villainous smile it was, too. "You mean whose dowry you covet, I presume," said he. "Let us state things clearly."

"Excuse me, sir, I said precisely what I meant."

The doctor, who had not the same reasons for being serious as his honourable friend indulged in a cynical smile. "And Rose?" he asked, "that pretty Rose?"

"Rose is a thing of the past," answered the young fellow. "I now realise my simplicity, and, so far as I am concerned, she no longer exists." Paul unquestionably spoke the truth, even when he added, "And I am half inclined to regret Mademoiselle Ligal's fortune, which seems to create so great an obstacle between us."

This declaration dispelled the clouds which darkened Mascarot's brow, and his spectacles emitted a softer light. "Reassure yourself," he answered gaily, "we will conquer that obstacle, eh, Hortebize? Only, Paul, my boy, I must not conceal from you that the part I wish you to play is infinitely more difficult than the one assigned to M. de Croisenois. It is also more dangerous by far, but at all events the reward will be in correspondence with the risk."

"Sustained and advised by you, I feel capable of doing everything and of succeeding!"

"You will need great audacity, unparalleled self-possession and exceeding skill. To begin with, you must renounce your very personality."

"Which I do with all my heart."

"And you must become altogether another person. You must adopt his

name, his past, his habits and ideas, his virtues and his vices. You must forget all that you have ever done or said yourself, and must labour to convince yourself that you are really the person you represent. This is the only way in which you can deceive others into a similar belief. The task will be a mighty one."

"Ah! sir," cried Paul, with enthusiasm, "do we trouble ourselves much about the obstacles in our road when we walk with our eyes riveted upon the showy light at the end?"

The genial doctor positively clapped his hands, as if he were applauding some actor on the stage. "Well said!" he exclaimed.

"Then," continued Mascarot, "we have but to raise the last corner of the veil and reveal to you your lofty destiny. This shall be speedily done—in a few days from now. In the meanwhile summon all your courage—drill your features, your eyes and lips so that they may never betray your secret thoughts. Do you understand me, my lord duke?"

The worthy agent stopped short, for after three or four discreet taps at the door Beaumarchef now presented himself. He was gorgeous to behold, for taking advantage of half an hour, when there was scarcely anyone in the office, he had gone to array himself in his best clothes.

"What's up?" asked Mascarot.

"Two letters, sir."

"Thanks. Give them to me, and leave us."

As the "assistant partner," accustomed to these brusque congés, retired, Mascarot examined the letters. "Ah!" he said; "news from Van Klopen and the Mussidan's. Let us first of all see what the illustrious ladies' tailor has to say." He tossed aside the envelope, and read aloud as follows:—"Dear Sir—Be satisfied; our friend Verminet has executed your orders with extreme cleverness. At his instigation Gaston de Gandelu has imitated, on five separate notes of a thousand francs each. Monsieur Martin Rigal's signature—the banker whose daughter you sent to me.

"I have these five notes at your disposal, and I remain, while awaiting new orders in respect to Madame de Bois d'Ardon,

"Your obedient servant,—VAN KLOPEN."

"That's one of them settled!" exclaimed B. Mascarot. "He won't ever cross our friend Paul's road with impunity." Then opening the other letter, he likewise read it aloud:—"I have to announce to you, sir, the rupture of the marriage between Mademoiselle Sabine and Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay. Mademoiselle is very ill. I have just heard the physician say she would probably not live through the day.—FLORESTAN."

At this intelligence, which threatened to frustrate all his plans, B. Mascarot was filled with such sudden fury that he brought his hand down with a crash upon his desk. "Thunder and lightning!" he shouted: "Is it possible that this little fool will play us such a shabby trick as to die now? We should be nicely situated with Croisenois on our hands. We should have all our work to do over again."

He pushed back his chair, and walked hurriedly up and down the room. "Florestan may be mistaken," he exclaimed. "Why should Mademoiselle de Mussidan's illness coincide with the rupture of this marriage? There is some secret, which we must know, for we cannot work in the dark."

"Do you wish me to go to the Mussidan's?" asked the doctor.

"Yes; it would be a good idea. Your carriage is at the door, is it not? You are a doctor, and they will let you see Mademoiselle Sabine."

Hortebize had already donned his overcoat, and was turning to leave

when Mascarot stopped him. "No," said he, "I have changed my mind. Neither of us ought to be seen near the house. I fancy, doctor, that one of our mines has exploded; it was too heavily charged. I fancy there has been an explanation between the count and the countess, and between the two the daughter has been struck down."

"But how shall we know?"

"I will see Florestan, and by him, I may discover the truth."

Thereupon, without another word, he dashed into his room and changed his clothes with all possible dispatch, at the same time leaving the door open, so as to be able to continue his conversation with the doctor.

"This blow," said he, "would be nothing if I had not so much on hand just now, but besides Croisenois I have to attend Paul. The Champdoce matter must be hurried on; and Catenac, the traitor, has put Perpignan and the duke in communication. I must see Perpignan and find out exactly what has been told him, and what he has guessed. I must also see Caroline Schimmel, and extract some information from her. Ah! why can't we turn twenty-four hours into thirty-six."

He was now ready, and called the doctor to him. "I am off," he said, in a low voice. "Don't lose sight of Paul for one single moment. We are not yet sure enough of him to let him loose with our secret. Take him to dine at Martin Rigal's, and then make some excuse for insisting upon his staying at your rooms to-night. See me to-morrow."

Thereupon he went out, too pre-occupied to hear the doctor's parting words: "Good luck, good luck!"

XIX.

ON leaving the Mussidan mansion after his promise to Sabine, M. de Breulh-Faverlay did not enter his carriage which was waiting for him in the courtyard. "Go home," said he, to his coachman, "I will follow on foot."

As often happens after a crisis, he had an imperious longing for motion. He wished to be alone, to tire himself out if possible, in hopes that he might thus collect his ideas, and recover his self-possession. He was not merely affected, but also surprised, and for long years had never experienced anything approaching his present feelings. His friends would have been amazed had they seen him striding along the Champs Elysées. He had quite lost that superb frigidity of manner "So-English-like" which all the young members of his club admired; his features usually so impassive bore signs of deep emotion, and mingled passion and stupefaction so carried him away that as he walked along, he actually talked aloud and gesticulated.

"And this is life!" he said. "A man fancies he has turned to steel—he calls himself blasé, aged, hardened—and lo! one look from two beautiful eyes makes him a school-boy again; he blushes and stammers and even—confound it all! detects a little moisture in the corner of his eye!"

He already loved Sabine when he asked her hand of her father—but not as he loved her, now that he knew she could not be his wife. At this moment she appeared to him to be endowed with every charming gift. Who would ever have supposed that he, the petted idol of society, adored by all the women who knew him, and feared by all the men as a rival, could be refused by the girl to whom he offered his fortune and his name?

"Ah!" he said to himself, regretfully, "she is just the companion I

dreamed of. Where else could I find such a tender nature, such an intelligent mind, so much innocence and frank fearlessness? Among the foolish dolls around me, who dress, and chatter, and talk slang, and imitate the women of the *demi-monde*? Is there another Sabine among the senseless creatures who look on life as a perpetual *cotillon*, and who take a husband as they choose a partner, because—a girl cannot waltz alone?" He hated all other women at this precise moment. "What a noble expression her face bore," he thought, "as she spoke of him. She believes in him entirely, and she adopts all his thoughts. With what beautiful pride she said: 'We—we are poor! We have no name!'"

However, M. de Breulh tried to battle against his jealous feelings. "Bah!" said he, twirling his walking stick. "The long and short of it is, I shall certainly die a bachelor. My valet will be my best friend in my old age. I shall make a god of my stomach. Baron Brisson declares that a man can comfortably eat four meals a day. That is something to look forward to; and to quicken my digestion, I shall have my heirs, those cousins of mine, quarrelling round my chair."

He shivered, but added presently, with a deep sigh: "Ah, my life's a failure!"

Meanwhile, cruel as was his deception and his wound, M. de Breulh saw nothing extraordinary in the fact that a woman should prefer another man to himself. He regretted it, but that was all. Sabine had judged him correctly when she said to herself, that he was worthy of any woman's love. M. de Breulh was indeed deserving of a very different pedestal to the one on which his friends and enemies, equally idiotic, had placed him. He was superior to his life, to his associates, and to the time in which he lived. On the death of his uncle he had thrown himself into what is called the whirlpool of fashionable dissipation, but he had soon wearied of an empty restless life. This fastidious mortal was not satisfied with possessing a victorious racing stable, with seeing his "cracks" made hot favourites by all the sporting journals, with being deceived by some actress whom he allowed a few hundred louis a month. For some time already, he had been seeking for some positive aim in life, some task to which he could devote all his energy and intelligence. He had determined that on the eve of his marriage he would sell his race horses and altogether break away from his old life, and now this long wished for marriage would never take place!

When he entered his club the traces of his emotion were so evident, that several young men around the card tables exchanged looks of dismay and hastened to ask if by chance, his horse "Chamboran," already a hot favourite for the Grand Prix, were not laid up.

"No," he answered, as he hurried into one of the small saloons set apart for letter-writing. "No, Chamboran is all right."

"What ill luck has befallen De Breulh?" asked one of the club men.

"Heaven only knows! but he evidently is in great haste to send off a letter."

He was in fact writing a note to M. de Mussidan and as it was to retract his word and request of Sabine's hand, the task was by no means an easy one. And, on reading his letter over, De Breulh noticed that it had an ironical turn, and that its general tenour indicated such mortification on his part, that inquiries as to what he really meant must necessarily follow. However chivalrous a man may be, he is still human, and some germs of evil ferment under the most generous resolutions.

"No," said the baron, "this letter is unworthy of me."

And upon this reflection, he began a second note, weighing every word, seeking for the best reasons he could bring forward, speaking vaguely of his life, of the difficulty of breaking up old habits, and of a liaison he could not terminate as he had intended. This little *chef d'œuvre* of diplomacy brought to a conclusion, he handed it to a servant, with directions to carry it instantly to its address.

M. de Breulh had thought that as soon as this duty was fulfilled, he should feel free in mind and body. But he was mistaken. He took a seat at a card-table, but at the end of a quarter of an hour, he felt that he decidedly had enough of gambling. He ordered dinner, but he had no appetite, and could not eat. He went to the opera, yawned, and the music made him feel nervous. At last he went home. The day had seemed a year long. He could not sleep, for he was still worried with thoughts of Sabine, whose fair face was ever before his eyes. What kind of man, thought he, was the one she preferred to him?

He esteemed Mademoiselle de Mussidan too much not to feel certain that her choice was worthy of her. At the same time, he had too much experience of life not to know that there are many seemingly inexplicable passions! When so many experienced men of the world are so often deluded and deceived, was it not quite possible for a young girl to make a mistake.

"What can I do for her?" said M. de Breulh to himself. "Can I open her eyes in any way?" And then, to excuse himself probably, for indulging in the faintest shadow of hope after what had taken place, he added: "If he be worthy of her, so be it, I will help her to overcome the obstacles in her path!"

The idea pleased him, and he took a bitter pleasure in thinking that he might perhaps insure the happiness of the woman he loved, and who, notwithstanding, had rejected him. Perhaps, without his knowing it, there was mingled with this generosity a vague desire to display his generosity to Sabine and awaken her admiration, if not her love.

At four o'clock in the morning he was still sitting in an arm-chair in front of the dying embers of his fire. He had almost decided to go and see André. When a man is rich it is easy for him to find an excuse to visit a painter's studio. M. de Breulh had no idea as to what he might do and say when he got there, he left it entirely to chance, trusting, perhaps, that his experience would properly advise him at the last moment. He had made up his mind before going to sleep, but on waking up, he again hesitated. Why should he meddle in a matter which did not concern him? He asked himself this question again and again. However, he was spurred on by curiosity, and so, at about two o'clock in the afternoon he ordered his carriage and in a few minutes afterwards was driving rapidly towards the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne.

Madame Poileveu, André's discreet concierge, was leaning on her broom at the street door when M. de Breulh's magnificent equipage drew up before her.

The good woman was quite dazed. Never in all her life had she beheld such showy steeds, nor seen so much silver on harness. The carriage was brilliant with varnish, and the liveried coachman and footman gorgeous to behold.

"Good heavens!" she thought, "he can't be coming here for us. He has certainly mistaken the house."

But her amazement was still greater when M. de Breulh emerged from

his brougham and asked, "Does Monsieur André, the artist, live here?"

"To be sure he does, and has been here for two years. Ah! if all artists were only like him! Never once has he been behind-hand with his rent. And then he is so orderly and sensible, so polite and considerate. There is never any rioting in his rooms. In my opinion he is absolutely perfect. If it were not for the little lady of the Champs Elysées—But there, now, my tongue is running away with me."

She rambled on, scarcely knowing what she was saying, so inquisitively did she watch the owner of this magnificent equipage.

"Where is his studio?" interrupted M. de Breulh, becoming impatient.

"On the fourth story—to the right—name on the door—can't make a mistake," jerked out the concierge. "But I'll show you the way, sir."

"By no means, my good woman, I won't trouble you." And M. de Breulh went towards the stairs, leaving Madame Poileveu as motionless as Lot's wife after her crystallisation.

"Lawk-a-daisies!" she muttered, "coming to see Monsieur André with all this parade! I don't understand it, for Monsieur André never puts on any airs. Why, for four days Poileveu hasn't swept his rooms, and yet he has never complained. But of course things can't go on like that. An artist who has friends like these coming to see him must be taken better care of. I must really find out who this great lord may be!" So saying she hid her broom behind the door and turned her attention to the footman.

In the meantime M. de Breulh had climbed the stairs with great deliberation. He evidently did not wish to arrive at the top entirely out of breath. On reaching the topmost landing he was about to knock at the door on which he read André's name, when hearing a quick, lithe bound on the stairs behind him, he turned, and found himself face to face with a tall, dark, young fellow, clad in one of those long white blouses which ornamental sculptors usually wear, and carrying a huge zinc pitcher which he had evidently just filled at the pump in the courtyard.

"Monsieur André?" asked M. de Breulh.

"Yes, sir, I am he."

"I wish to speak to you."

"Be kind enough to walk in here." And the young painter opened the door of his studio and showed his visitor in.

M. de Breulh's first impression of André had been extremely favourable. He had been struck by his frank countenance, clear honest eyes, and full rich voice. But while he said, "He is a manly, good-looking fellow," he was shocked by the costume André wore, and this although he had thrown aside many prejudices. It was difficult for him to believe that a man beloved by Sabine de Mussidan could wear a blouse and go to the pump for water. However, he did not allow his surprise to be seen. In fact, since the previous evening, he had had time to regain his usual air of indifference.

"I ought to apologize sir, for receiving you like this," said André. "But the truth is, when a man is not wealthy he is never well served except by himself!"

As he spoke he threw off his blouse without the least embarrassment, and placed his pitcher in a corner. His air and manner pleased M. de Breulh, who smiled cordially.

"It is for me to apologize for my intrusion," said he. "I was sent here by one of my friends—" He hesitated for a name.

"Ah, yes. By Prince Crescenzi, perhaps!"

M. de Breulh hardly knew the celebrated amateur, but he snatched at the perch which was offered him. "Precisely!" he answered. "The prince extols your talent and speaks of you with the greatest enthusiasm. Having the utmost confidence in his taste, I said to myself that I should very much like to have a picture by you; and I can assure you your work will be in good company!"

André bowed, colouring as deeply as a school-girl complimented by a bishop. "I am infinitely obliged to you for your patronage, sir," he said, "but unfortunately, I fear you have taken useless trouble in calling on me—"

"And why?"

"Because I have been so busy in other ways during the last few months that I have really nothing to show you."

"Never mind," interrupted M. de Breulh, "we have the future before us. What is not done you can do."

"That is very true, sir, if you are disposed to place confidence in me—"

"Of course I am," interrupted De Breulh.

"In that case, we have only to choose a subject."

André had by this time quite conquered his visitor, who said to himself, "I ought, of course, to hate this fellow, but upon my life, I think I like him better than any one I ever saw!"

As he remained silent, mentally analysing his feelings, the young painter spoke again: "I have here," said he, "some thirty sketches in oils which might, I hope, make decent paintings, and if one of the subjects happened to suit you—"

"Let us examine them," said De Breulh, courteously.

Having made his estimate of the young man's character, he now wished to judge of him as an artist, and proceeded to examine the sketches and cartoons on the walls with serious attention.

André did not speak, but thought to himself that this order might prove the turning point in his fortunes, for Prince Crescenzi was one of the seven or eight European amateurs whose fiat sufficed for the merest daub to be valued at ten thousand francs. However, André was in no mood to rejoice, for he was more sad and hopeless than ever before in his harassed life. Two evenings previously, Sabine had left him, saying that she was about to take a decisive step and would write to him on the morrow. The morrow had gone by, and now it was four o'clock on the second day, and yet not one word had he received from her. He was on thorns—not that he doubted Sabine, but because he had no means of ascertaining what might have transpired at the Mussidan mansion, which he was quite unable to enter. He was at this moment undergoing intolerable torture at the thought that his destiny was no doubt being decided, without his being able to influence it in the slightest degree, or even to hasten its consummation.

Meanwhile M. de Breulh had finished his examination. He considered that André's talent was indisputable, although there was evidence of inexperience, together with some great faults in the designs offered to view. Still they were all full of originality, and plainly enough André was a true artist in the broadest sense of the phrase. De Breulh's jealousy almost revived as he felt himself obliged to make this admission. But after a brief struggle he crushed all unworthy sentiments for good, and frankly and loyally offered the young painter his hand.

"When I came here," he said, "I was desirous of having a painting by you, and now I am altogether determined to have one. I am no longer influenced by a friend's opinion, I can see and appreciate your talent myself."

And as André did not speak he resumed : "I have chosen my subject, now we will discuss it in detail."

Poor, without patrons, and artistically speaking unschooled, hampered moreover by the rude labour his poverty necessitated, André had had neither time nor means to study in southern lands the secrets of classical art. He contented himself with portraying what he saw and felt. Among his sketches there was one which he called, "*Monday at the barrière.*" On Mondays the intemperate Parisian workman habitually takes an outing, and his outing frequently ends in strife. Thus in André's sketch, in the foreground, two men were fighting and a third endeavouring to separate them. They were in their shirts, which torn apart, allowed their broad chests to be seen. The muscles of their brawny arms stood out in bold relief. Their features were convulsed with hatred, wine, and anger. A little to the right lay a woman with loosened hair, unconscious and bleeding from a wound on the temple, while two of her terrified companions leaning over her were trying to bring her back to life. A few lookers on—children running away in fright, and in the distance policemen hurrying to the rescue—made up the picture. The subject was commonplace, but true—and it is truth alone in these days that can save art. Such was the sketch that M. de Breulh selected.

André next entered into full particulars concerning the composition, the proportions of the figures and the dimensions of the canvas. In short, nothing was forgotten. His visitor, with voice and gesture, approved all he said.

"Whatever you do," he remarked, "will be well done, of that I am certain. Let nothing hamper you : follow your inspirations."

M. de Breulh was in an agony to get away. He keenly realised how false his position was. André's confidence troubled him exceedingly and he almost lost his self-assurance. When everything else was arranged it cost him a violent effort to broach the question of remuneration. If he looked for any false modesty and affected disinterestedness he was disappointed, for he met with none.

"Monsieur," said André, "the value of a picture is a conventional matter. A canvas of the dimensions we have agreed on costs eighty francs ; covered with paint, it may be worthless or priceless. Wait until it is finished to decide."

"Do you think," interrupted M. de Breulh, "that ten thousand francs—"

André waved his hand in protest. "Too much !" he exclaimed, "far too much ! No, sir. As yet I have no reputation, and four thousand francs would be handsome remuneration. However, if I succeeded beyond all hope and expectation, I might ask you six thousand."

"Very well," said M. de Breulh, drawing from his pocket an elegant Russian leather case, and laying on the table two notes of a thousand francs each, he added, "I will pay you as usual, half in advance."

The young painter turned scarlet. "You are jesting, sir," he stammered.

"Not at all," answered De Breulh, gravely. "I have certain fixed principles in business matters which I never depart from." And then, in the most encouraging tone, he added : "These notes are given instead of a written contract, that is all."

In spite of this assurance, André's pride was hurt. "But, I can't give you this picture for five or even six months," said he. "I have a contract with a rich architect, M. Gandelu, to execute the ornamental sculpture on his house."

"Never mind," said M. de Breulh, "take your own time."

Of course it was not possible for André to offer any further opposition, unless he wished to look like a fool. He therefore quietly assented, and even thought to himself, that the money came at a time when it was much needed.

"Now," said De Breulh approaching the door and opening it, prior to departure, "let me wish you success. In the meantime, if you will come some morning and breakfast with me, I will show you a Murillo which will gladden your heart!" And as if to confirm the invitation, he handed the artist his card and left the studio.

A moment elapsed before André looked at the card, but when his eyes fell upon it, the name of De Breulh-Faverlay started out like a flash of lightning across a thunderous sky. For a moment he could not breathe, and then he was shaken from head to foot with intense anger. He fancied he had been cajoled, bribed—trifled with! Hardly knowing what he was doing, he dashed out on to the landing, and leaning over the baluster called out. "Monsieur! Monsieur!"

De Breulh, who was now on the lower floor, looked up.

"Come back!" cried André, "come back!"

After a moment's hesitation the baron obeyed, and as soon as he reached the studio, André abruptly exclaimed, in a voice quivering with indignation, "Take back your money, sir; I will not have it!"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Simply that I have reflected. I cannot paint a picture for you."

"Ah! indeed—and why, pray?"

"Why?" M. de Breulh knew perfectly well why. He instantly realised that Sabine had spoken about him to her lover—a point he had not thought of before. With a certain lack of generosity, he took advantage of the young artist's difficult position.

"Because," stammered André.

"Because is no reason," said De Breulh, mercilessly.

André was fast losing his head. It was impossible for him to give the reason of this sudden change of manner. He would have died rather than pronounce Sabine's name, and considered there was but one way out of his difficulty—"Well," he answered, with a cold stare of disdain, "your face displeases me! Is that a reason?"

"Do you mean to insult me, Monsieur André?"

"Just as you please!"

Patience was by no means M. de Breulh's distinguishing quality. He turned white with anger and started forward, but his natural generosity came to the rescue, and recovering himself as far as possible, he exclaimed: "Accept my apologies, Monsieur André. I have played a part—I fear unworthy of you and of me. I ought, when I first came in, to have given you my name, and told you, 'I know everything.'"

"I do not understand you, sir," answered André in icy tones.

"If you don't understand me, why do you doubt me then? I have deserved your distrust, however. Cease to feign; Mademoiselle Sabine has spoken to me with the most entire frankness. And if you doubt my words and require a proof of my assertion, let me tell you that the canvas there, with its face to the wall, is the portrait of Mademoiselle de Mussidan."

As André still did not speak, M. de Breulh smiled sadly. "I will say, furthermore," he resumed, "that yesterday, at Mademoiselle Sabine's desire, I withdrew my request for her hand."

André had been profoundly touched by M. de Breulh's hearty self-condemnation, and these last words finished his subjugation. "I can never thank you, sir—" he began.

But De Breulh interrupted him. "A man needs no thanks," said he, "for doing his duty. I should not tell you the truth, were I to deny that I was most painfully surprised. But tell me, would you not have done the same thing had you been in my place?"

"I think I should."

"And now we are friends, are we not?" and De Breulh held out his hand.

André grasped it, and stammered in reply, "Friends, yes, friends."

"Let us say no more about the picture, which was in reality a pretext," resumed De Breulh. "I will be perfectly frank with you. I said to myself, on my way here, 'If the man whom Mademoiselle Sabine prefers to me is worthy of her, I will do all in my power to induce her family to look favourably on his suit.' I came here to sit in judgment upon you, and I now say to you: Do me a great pleasure, and a great honour: allow me to place at your disposal, myself and my fortune, my influence, and that of my friends."

It was with devoted enthusiasm and absolute sincerity that M. de Breulh Faverlay put himself at the disposal of this young fellow whose happiness he so envied. However, André shook his head. "I shall never forget your offer, sir; but—" He hesitated, and then suddenly resumed: "I will be as frank as yourself, and tell you the whole truth. You think me foolishly susceptible, no doubt; but you must remember that misfortunes, unless they destroy all personal dignity, excite and irritate a man's pride. I love Mademoiselle de Mussidan with all my heart. There is not one drop of blood in my veins that is not devoted to her service, and yet—" He checked himself, and then with more composure added, "Pray do not take offence at what I am about to say. I would renounce Mademoiselle Sabine for ever rather than accept your assistance."

"But that's absolute folly."

"No, no; it is not folly; it is wisdom. Were I to accede to your wishes, I should feel myself profoundly humiliated by your self-abnegation; I should be madly jealous of the rôle you played. Am I not already sufficiently conscious of your superiority? You are one of the wealthiest men in Paris; you belong to one of the most distinguished families in France; while I am poor; I am so utterly alone and unknown, sir, that I have never even been summoned for the conscription. In short, you possess everything I lack."

"But I also have been poor," replied De Breulh; "I have been more wretched, possibly, than ever you have been."

André, who knew nothing of M. de Breulh's past career, and was acquainted only with his present dazzling position, looked at him in astonishment.

"Do you know what I was doing at your age?" continued the baron. "I was dying of hunger at Sonora, and to keep myself from starvation I had to enter the service of a cattle-raiser. Do you think I learned nothing in those days?"

"Then," exclaimed the young artist, "you will be the better able to understand me. I am willing to admit myself to be your equal; but the day I accepted pecuniary assistance from you that equality would cease. I am indebted to my energy and courage for Mademoiselle de Mussidan's goodwill. She had faith in me from the day she said, 'Raise yourself to

my level.' She ordered me to do so, and I will obey her or perish in the attempt. But, at all events, I am determined to succeed or perish alone. I don't choose that any other man should be able to say or think : André owes all his happiness to my rare generosity and chivalrous unselfishness."

"Oh ! monsieur !" protested De Breulh ; "monsieur !"

"No," interrupted André, "you must not misunderstand me ! I know very well that such words would never pass your lips ; but you could not help thinking them. I should know it, and the daughter of the Count de Mussidan, then the wife of the painter André, would know it too. That is to say, I should become Sabine's husband at the cost of the only things that belong to me—my pride and independence. Our very marriage would be her first disillusion ; for she would involuntarily institute a comparison between us. What should I then be in her eyes ? No, no, my life would be poisoned—your ghost would rise between my wife and myself !"

He stopped short, aghast at his own violence. Another sentence and he would perhaps have threatened this gallant man who showed such generous kindness to him. With a great effort he regained his self-control, and then, in a tone of perfect courtesy, added, "But I am talking at random, sir, for we owe you much already, and I hope you will allow me to consider myself your friend."

Like Sabine, he said, "we ;" and just as Sabine had predicted, he represented all offers of patronage and protection. But M. de Breulh was man enough to understand André's conduct—conduct which might possibly bring a smile to the lips of most people in these days, when all serious and exalted sentiments are considered preposterous and affected. The baron quietly replaced the bank-notes in his pocket-book, and then, in a ringing voice, exclaimed, "I approve of your conduct, sir ; and remember that, at all times and at all seasons, you may rely upon Breulh-Faverlay. Farewell !"

When he was again alone, André realised that he was less unhappy than he had been for two days. Thanks to M. de Breulh, he knew now that Sabine had encountered no unexpected opposition in breaking off the projected marriage, and although astonished at her delay in writing to give him the glad tidings, he was no longer alarmed. It was impossible, however, for him to work, and so he threw himself into an arm-chair and mused over the scene that had just taken place. He would have totally forgotten the dinner-hour, if Madame Poileveu had not entered the studio, without knocking. "Here is a letter," she said ; "the postman has just left it."

It was an unheard-of event for Madame Poileveu to carry a letter to the fourth floor ; but the artist had assumed extraordinary importance in her eyes since she had seen his recent visitor's carriage. However, André was so preoccupied that this worthy woman's surprising complaisance did not strike him. He had no thoughts but for Sabine.

"A letter !" he exclaimed, starting up ; and tearing it open he at once glanced at the signature. The note came from Modeste, Mademoiselle de Mussidan's maid. What did this mean ? He shuddered, with a presentiment of some great misfortune, and, half bewildered, read as follows :—"I address you, sir, to inform you that mademoiselle succeeded in the matter she undertook ; but I am sorry to say that I have also bad news for you. Mademoiselle is very ill."

These last words terrified André. "Sabine ill !" he stammered, with out paying heed to Madam Poileveu's eager ears. "Sabine too ill to write to me herself ! She may be in danger ! She may even be dead!"

He repeated the last word wildly : “ Dead ! dead ! ” Then, crumpling up the disastrous letter and throwing it on to the floor, he rushed from the room and dashed down the stairs into the street. He had not even doffed his white blouse, nor paused to take a hat.

Mother Poileveu was astounded. “ Good heavens ! ” said she ; “ what are we coming to ? He’s mad, to be sure.” She paused and smiled, having just perceived the crumpled letter on the floor. With bland composure she at once picked it up, smoothed it out carefully, and read it. “ And so,” she murmured, “ the little lady’s name is Sabine. A pretty name, to be sure ! And she is ill, is she ? I have a notion that the old gentleman, so amiable and so badly dressed, who came here early this morning and questioned me about Mousieur André, would give something worth having for this letter. But no—that would never do ! ‘ Honesty’s the best policy,’ as the papers say.”

XX.

WHEN Madame Poileveu came to the conclusion that her artist was mad, she was not, perhaps, so very far from the truth. Her opinion was probably shared by all the people who met this tall young man in the white blouse, as he rushed with almost inconceivable rapidity along the streets leading from the Quartier des Martyrs to the Champs Elysées.

As he left his house he saw an empty cab, but he did not think of taking it ; for could the miserable horse move as swiftly as his strong young limbs ? He threaded his way through the crowd so hastily, and had so strange an expression, that people quickly moved aside to let him pass, and then turned to look after him. He had no idea what to do when he reached the Hôtel de Mussidan. Sabine was ill, dying possibly—well, if he could not see her, at least he would be near her. In Paris, such people are to be seen at every hour in the day ; people who hurry along without seeing or hearing—driven onward by their passions as bullets are impelled by powder.

It was only on reaching the Rue de Matignon that André sufficiently recovered his senses to reflect and deliberate. As much to regain full possession of his faculties as his breath, he sat down at a few steps from the Hôtel de Mussidan. He had reached the spot !—and now, how should he go to work to obtain the information he wanted ? It was dark. The gas lamps were barely visible through one of those February fogs which always follow sharp frosts. It was cold. The Rue de Matignon, always un frequented, was now absolutely deserted. Not a single cab rolled by, and not a single脚步声 was heard ; the only sound was that of the traffic in the busy Faubourg Saint Honoré some few hundred yards off. The young painter now realised with absolute despair that he was utterly powerless. He could not move hand or foot without compromising the woman he loved.

Still he rose and went towards the gate of the house, as if he hoped that its aspect would tell him something. It seemed to him that if Sabine were really dying the very stones would break out into lamentations. But the house was wrapped in fog, and he could hardly tell which of the windows were lighted. Reason bade him withdraw, wait patiently and hope ; but the more imperious voice of passion said, “ Wait ! ” And he waited. Why ? He did not know. It seemed to him that Modeste, who had written, would divine that he was there, suffering an agony of suspense,

and that she would come to look for him. All at once a new idea flashed through his mind. "What I can't do," thought he, "might be done by M. de Breulh—he might easily send and make inquiries."

He fortunately had the baron's card in his pocket, and after deciphering the address as best he could, he hurried away. M. de Breulh-Faverlay resided in a splendid mansion in the Avenue de l'Impératrice, where, he declared, he was by no means commodiously lodged; however, his horses had air and space; they were comfortable, and as for himself, it did not matter. When André entered the courtyard, he perceived a carriage waiting there. Four or five footmen were talking and laughing in the well lighted hall. He went straight towards them.

"I wish to see Monsieur de Breulh," he said.

The lackeys surveyed him from head to foot with mingled contempt and surprise. "Monsieur has gone out," they replied at last, "and will not return till very late."

André understood them, well enough, and having by this time recovered his senses, he again drew forth M. de Breulh's card, and with a pencil wrote thereon these five words. "One minute—a service—André."

"Take this," said he, "and give it to your master as soon as he comes in."

He then went slowly down the steps. He was sure M. de Breulh was at home, and would send in pursuit of him, as soon as he received the card. He was not mistaken, for five minutes later, a valet ushered him into the baron's library.

At sight of André, De Breulh divined that a catastrophe had occurred. "What is it?" he asked hastily.

"Sabine is dying," answered the young painter, who at once proceeded to recount all that had happened since he had seen the baron a few hours previously.

"But what can I do, my poor fellow, to put an end to your uncertainty and anxiety?"

"You, sir? Why, you can send and inquire at M. de Mussidan's house."

"Think a moment, yesterday, I wrote to M. de Mussidan to break off my marriage with his daughter. It would be unpardonable impertinence on my part to send now and inquire after the young lady's health. It would really amount to saying, 'I have withdrawn, and so your daughter is dying of grief.'"

"You are right," muttered André, who had not thought of all this.

M. de Breulh was almost as worried as the young painter, and asked himself, how it would be possible to ascertain the truth as to Sabine's condition. For some minutes he remained absorbed in reflection. "Ah! Eureka!" cried he suddenly, "I have it. I am a distant relative of a lady, who is also a relative of the Mussidans—the Vicomtesse de Bois d'Ardon. She will be delighted to serve us; she is a foolish young creature, but she has a golden heart. Come, my carriage is in the courtyard."

The footmen were amazed to see their master on such terms of intimacy with this young man in a blouse, and when the carriage drove off at full speed, an old, white-haired valet, the Nestor of the servants hall, expressed his opinion that something mysterious was going on.

Not a word was exchanged by André and M. de Breulh during their brief drive to Madame de Bois d'Ardon's mansion in the Champs Elysées. The carriage had not fairly stopped, when the baron alighted. "Wait for me," said he to André; "I will be back in a moment."

In one bound he reached the house. "Is madame at home?" he asked of the servants who knew him.

"Madame receives," was the stately reply.

Fair and dimpled, fresh and ever smiling—red haired, since red hair was the fashion—with the loveliest eyes in the world, Madame de Bois d'Ardon was considered one of the most charming women in Paris. She was thirty. She knew everything, had seen everything, feared nothing, and talked incessantly, with considerable spirit and cleverness, and a dash of roguish malice as well. She spent forty thousand francs a year, on her toilette; but when she said to her husband, "I have not a dress to put on my back," she spoke the truth, for she ruined everything she wore in less than no time. She was careless even to imprudence, and scandal-mongers pretended she had had a dozen lovers since her marriage; but this was altogether false, for she had never had a single one. She really adored her husband, and was horribly afraid of him! He knew it, but kept the knowledge to himself, for he was wise. He allowed the viscountess to fit hither and thither like a puppet at the end of a wire; but he held the wire with a firm hand. Such was the woman towards whom a footman, in a livery too showy to be in good taste, now conducted M. de Breulh.

Madame de Bois d'Ardon was in her boudoir when the baron was announced. She had just fixed the last pin in her toilette—the fifth she had made that day, and to kill time, she was examining a coquettish costume of a vivandière of the time of Louis Quinze—a *chef d'œuvre* of Van Klopen's—which she meant to assume on returning from the Opera,—for a fancy ball at the Austrian embassy.

On seeing M. de Breulh she uttered an exclamation of delight. Although they rarely met except in society, they were really very much attached to each other. In their youthful days they had been in the habit of passing a month each summer at the château of their uncle the old Count de Faverlay, and now as then they familiarly called each other by their Christian names.

"You here at this hour, Gontran!" cried the viscountess. "It is a miracle, a dream—" The words died on her lips as she caught sight of her visitor's pale, harassed countenance. "What is the matter?" she asked. "Is there any trouble!"

"Not yet, I hope; but I am very anxious. I have just heard that Mademoiselle de Mussidan is dangerously ill."

"Is it possible! Poor Sabine! What is the matter with her?"

"I don't know, and that is precisely why I have come here. I want you, Clotilde, to send one of your people at once to Mussidan's house, to ascertain what truth there is in what we have heard."

Madame de Bois d'Ardon stared at the baron with amazement: "Are you jesting?" she asked. "Why don't you send yourself?"

"I can't, and if you are charitable and kind, you won't even ask me why. In the first place, I should not tell you the truth. In the next, I wish you to promise me faithfully never to mention to anyone that I have asked you to do this."

Although this mysterious answer keenly whetted Madame de Bois d'Ardon's curiosity, she proved momentarily discreet, and did not ask another question. "So be it then," said she, "I respect your secret. I would go this moment only Bois d'Ardon would scold me for letting him sit down to dinner alone. But as soon as the meal is over, I'll go."

"Thanks! a thousand thanks; and now I'll go home and wait for news from you."

"By no means. Stay here and dine."

"Impossible, a friend is waiting for me, at the door."

The viscountess knew from De Breulh's tone that it would be useless for her to insist. However, she mentally resolved to inquire, sooner or later, into this mystery. "Do as you please, then," she said with well affected carelessness. "I will send you a note this evening."

De Breulh pressed her hand, and hurried away. At the door of the house he found André, who had been pacing restlessly up and down, not being able to sit still in the carriage. "Keep up your courage, my friend," said the baron. Madame de Bois d'Ardon knows nothing of Mademoiselle Sabine's illness. This, of course, speaks well, for if it were serious, she would no doubt have been informed. At all events we shall know the truth in three hours.

"Three hours!" groaned André in the same tone, as he might have said, "three centuries."

"It is a long time, I admit, but we will talk of her while we wait, for you must not leave me, but rather come home and share my dinner."

André nodded assent. He had no energy left to contest any point; he seemed almost benumbed.

If M. de Breulh's servants had been surprised to see their master go out with the young man in the blouse, they were utterly stupefied when they saw them return together; and the adventure assumed fantastic proportions in their eyes, when their haughty master sat down to dinner with André in the magnificent dining-room, ordering the very butler to withdraw, so as to be more at ease. The dinner was exquisite, but the two men were in no humour to appreciate it. They wielded their knives and forks mechanically, and drank as little as they ate. Over and over again, they endeavoured to speak on indifferent topics, but it was in vain. They so fully realised the inutility of their efforts that after dinner, when coffee was served in the library, they relapsed into profound silence. Their present situation after what had occurred that afternoon was odd enough, but carried away by the rapidity of events they did not remark its strangeness. André never once took his eyes from the clock, while de Breulh sat staring fixedly into the fire. At last, just as ten was striking, they heard a noise in the vestibule—a sound of voices, and the rustling of silk skirts. M. de Breulh was starting up when the door opened, and Madame de Bois d'Ardon entered like a whirlwind. "It is I," she exclaimed.

It was certainly far from correct for a married lady to visit a bachelor's abode at that late hour, but the viscountess generally did as she pleased. "I have come here, Gontran," she resumed with extraordinary vehemence, "to tell you what I think of your conduct; it is simply—abominable, unworthy of a gentleman."

"Clotilde!"

"Be quiet! you are a monster. Ah! yes, now I understand why you didn't dare send to inquire about poor Sabine. You knew very well what the effect of your letter would be."

M. de Breulh smiled, and turning to André remarked: "What did I tell you?"

This observation awoke Madame de Bois d'Ardon to the fact that a stranger was present. She took it for granted that she had committed

some terrible indiscretion. "Good heavens!" she exclaimed, starting back, "I thought you were alone."

"It is the same as if I were," answered the baron gravely; "this gentleman is a very dear friend from whom I have no secrets." So saying he laid his hand on André's arm."

"Allow me, my dear Clotilde," he added, "to introduce to you Monsieur André, a painter whose name is unknown to-day, but will be famous tomorrow."

André bowed profoundly, but the viscountess for once in her life was silenced. This intimate friend's white blouse utterly confounded her. And why this peculiar introduction?

"Then," resumed M. de Breulh, "our information was correct." He lightly accented the "our." "Mademoiselle de Mussidan is really ill?"

"Alas!"

"Did you see her?" asked the baron.

"Yes, I saw her, Gontran. Had you been with me your heart would have melted, you would have regretted this fatal rupture as well. Poor Sabine, she did not know me. She did not even know I was in the room. She lay in bed whiter than the sheets, as cold and as stiff as a statue, her eyes open wide, and for twenty hours she has been in this condition. One would have thought she was dead but for the tears which every few minutes rolled down her cheeks."

André had intended to repress every sign of emotion in presence of the viscountess, but his feelings were stronger than his will. "Ah!" cried he, "she will die; I know it perfectly well."

His tone was so full of anguish that the light-hearted lady was touched. "I assure you, sir," she said, "that you exaggerate the situation. There is no danger—none at present, at all events. The physicians call it a kind of catalepsy, and say it is by no means an uncommon occurrence with nervous persons on receiving a sudden shock."

"But what shock could it have been in this case?" asked André.

The viscountess did not reply. She turned towards her cousin, her eyes all aglow with curiosity. What on earth had this man in a workman's blouse to do with Sabine, and how did he happen to be there! "No one told me," she said at last, "that Sabine's illness was caused by the rupture of her marriage arrangements, but I took it for granted—"

"And you were very much mistaken," interrupted M. de Breulh, "I know what I say, my dear cousin, and it is for this very reason that I am so much alarmed. But you have told us nothing after all, Clotilde; what has really happened?"

M. De Breulh's calmness and assurance, and a glance he exchanged with André, began to enlighten the viscountess. "I asked every question I dared," she replied, "but the answers were exceedingly vague. Sabine looked as if she were dead: her father and mother hovered about round her bed like two ghosts. If they had killed her themselves with their own hands, remorse could not have been stamped more clearly on their faces. They absolutely terrified me—"

M. de Breulh interrupted the viscountess, impatiently. "Tell me precisely what were the answers to your questions," said he.

"I will tell you. First, it seems that Sabine had been so agitated all the morning, that her mother asked her if she were ill."

"We know that; and we also know the reason of it."

"Ah!" ejaculated the viscountess with an amazed stare. "In the after-

noon you saw Sabine, it seems. Where she went or where she was after you left her no one seems to know, but they have positive proof that she neither left the house nor received any letter. At all events, it was nearly an hour before she returned to her room, where her maid, a nice girl who is devoted to her, sat sewing. Sabine said something to this girl, Modeste, who looked up, and seeing her mistress so pale ran towards her. Just as she reached her, Sabine swayed and fell with a wild shriek. She was taken up and laid on her bed, and she has been in the state I described ever since —she has neither spoken nor moved."

André listened with all eagerness to Madame de Bois d'Ardon. His imagination depicted Sabine as the viscountess had seen her. De Breulh, who was more self-possessed, watched his cousin keenly, trying as it were to penetrate her thoughts, for it seemed to him that she was keeping something back. "Come, that's not everything," he said at last.

"Yes it is."

"Would you swear it?"

The viscountess started and averted her eyes. "I don't understand you," she said, nervously. "Why do you look at me in that way?"

M. de Breulh hesitated. He had had great experience of life, and he knew, for he had learned it at his own cost, that a man ought always to distrust those deceitful appearances which simpletons call the evidence of facts. And yet before venturing on a line of conduct which might have serious consequences, he reflected and hesitated, and to conceal his embarrassment, began to pace the room. A moment's unpleasant silence followed; but suddenly he stopped short in front of the viscountess, who was sitting beside the fire. "My dear Clotilde," he said, "I presume I am telling you nothing new when I say that you have been woefully slandered at times."

"Pooh! What do I care."

"But I assure you I have always judged you more fairly than the world. You are the incarnation of imprudence. Your presence here at this hour is proof of the truth of this assertion. You are worldly, frivolous, headstrong, and very, very foolish; but you are also, as I very well know, a thoroughly good woman at heart; true as steel, and brave as well."

"What are you driving at, Gontran?"

"At this, Clotilde: I think there would be no risk in confiding to you a secret which involves the honour of, and perhaps the lives of several persons."

Much more agitated than she wished to appear, Clotilde rose to her feet. "Thank you, Gontran," she said, quietly, "you have judged me truly."

But André, who now understood Monsieur de Breulh, came forward. "Have you a right to speak?" he asked.

"My dear André," answered his host, "my honour is as much involved in this matter as yours is. Will you not trust me?" Then turning towards the viscountess, he added: "First of all, tell us the whole of it."

"Oh, the whole is very little, and only something I learned from Modeste. It seems you had hardly left Mademoiselle de Mussidan, when Monsieur de Clinchan arrived."

"Clinchan—an old maniac, eh? A friend of the count's, I believe?"

"Precisely; they had a—well, what shall I call it?—so frightful a quarrel together, that finally De Clinchan was taken ill, and it was only with great difficulty that he was able to get to his carriage."

"Ah! That's rather odd."

"Wait a moment. After Clinchan had left, Octave and his wife had a scene. You know my cousin—his voice thundered through the house. It was while this was going on that Sabine reached her room, more dead than alive, and Modeste thinks she had perhaps heard something her father and mother were saying."

Each word the viscountess spoke strengthened De Breulh's suspicions. "You see, Clotilde," he exclaimed, "there is something strange about all this, and you will think it so all the more when you know everything." Thereupon, without omitting a single detail of any importance, he told her André's and Sabine's story.

Madame de Bois d'Ardon quivered as she listened—quivered with mingled apprehension and pleasure. She was anxious for Sabine and André, but she was delighted to have her curiosity satisfied. "Forgive me," said she, holding out her hand as soon as her cousin ceased speaking, "my reproaches and accusations were most unjust. I am indeed of your opinion, yes, there is some strange mystery in all this."

"And something, I fear, which will put another obstacle in our friend André's path."

"Why do you say that?" asked the young painter, aghast.

"I can't tell. It is a mere presentiment. But now mark my words. At Sabine's request I have withdrawn all pretensions to her hand, in your favour, but I will not leave the field open to any intruder. Mademoiselle de Mussidan would not be my wife. She must be yours."

"Yes," said the viscountess, "but how are we to know what has happened?"

"We will discover it in some way or other—that is to say, if you are with us, if you consent to help us."

All women are delighted to be able to dabble in matrimonial affairs, and the viscountess was particularly pleased to have a hand in an affair that had opened so romantically. Far from discouraging her, the obstacles quickened her interest. Would not this be an excellent opportunity to prove once more the superiority of feminine penetration and diplomacy? She would have to fight, intrigue, and negotiate, envelop herself in mystery. How delightful! "I am entirely at your disposal," she said. "Have you arranged any plan?"

"No, not as yet, but one shall be soon adopted. So far as Mademoiselle de Mussidan is concerned, it would be folly to act otherwise than with the utmost frankness. Let us address ourselves to her directly. André will write to her and ask for an explanation, and if she is better to-morrow you will see her and give her the note."

The proposal was certainly bold, and many women would scarcely have cared for the suggested errand. However, the viscountess did not trouble herself particularly about the proprieties. "I don't think that would do," she said, with a pretty little air of affected wisdom. "In fact I think it would be a very unwise thing to do."

"Do you think so?"

"I'm sure of it; but let Monsieur André decide."

André now came forward. While M. de Breulh and the viscountess were conversing, he had fully recovered his self-possession. It was time he should intervene; the moment was a decisive one. "I think you are right, madame," said he. "It would be imprudent to let Mademoiselle de Mussidan see so suddenly that we have confided a secret which is her's, even more than ours, to another person."

The viscountess nodded approval.

"There is, I think, a safer and more simple plan," resumed André. "If to-morrow morning Madame la Viscomtesse would ask Mademoiselle de Mussidan's maid, Modeste, to meet me at noon at the corner of the Avenue de Matignon, she will find me there. From her I shall no doubt be able to obtain precise information."

"That's an excellent idea," declared Madame de Bois d'Ardon, "Early to-morrow I will call at the Mussidan's and deliver your message."

She stopped short, and uttered a pretty little shriek as looking at the clock, she perceived it was nearly midnight. "Heavens!" she cried, rising hastily, "and I have to go to a ball at the Austrian embassy, and am not even dressed!" Then with a coquettish gesture, she drew her shawl round her shoulders and darted away, exclaiming as she hurried down the stairs: "I will call here, Gontran, to-morrow, on my way to the Bois." Her movements were so rapid, that before M. de Breulh could ring, or even follow her, she was gone.

Now, somewhat easier in mind, André and his host talked for a long time over the fire with all the freedom of friends, who having suffered together, had a common object in view. They had only known each other for a few hours, but they parted like two old comrades, whose affection, founded on mutual esteem, took no account of services rendered and received. M. de Breulh wished to send André home in his carriage, but the young artist refused. However, the baron prevailed on him to accept the loan of a hat and an overcoat. "To-morrow," murmured André as he walked home, "to-morrow Modeste will tell me everything, that is providing that kind-hearted, though frivolous, Madame de Bois d'Ardon does not forget her promise during the night."

But Madame de Bois d'Ardon could be in earnest sometimes. When she returned from the ball at the Austrian embassy, she did not go to bed, lest she might not awake in time to be at the Mussidans' before ten o'clock, and so when André reached the rendezvous, he found Modeste awaiting him. Her pale face and reddened eyes showed how she suffered for her young mistress. "Sabine," said she, "had not regained consciousness. The family physician did not express any anxiety, but he had asked for a consultation."

That was everything. André pressed Modeste with questions, but she could tell him nothing more; she had in reality imparted all the information she possessed to the viscountess. However, it was agreed between the young artist and the maid that they should meet each morning and evening at the same spot.

For two days longer Sabine's situation remained unchanged, and André grew desperate. He spent all his time in hurrying to the Rue de Matignon, and thence to M. de Breulh's, where he often met Madame de Bois d'Ardon. On the third day, when he met Modeste in the morning, he found her in great despair. The cataleptic attack was over, but Sabine was now struggling against a nervous fever.

The faithful maid and André were so absorbed in their grief that they did not notice one of the Mussidan servants who passed them—that very valet Florestan, who was on his way to the post with a letter for B. Mascarat. "So Modeste," said André, in a low voice, "she is in danger, you say—very great danger?"

"The doctor declared it would be decided this evening whether she would live or die. Be here at five to-night."

André tottered away, overcome with grief ; and when he reached De Breulh's house, he was so strange and excited that his friend insisted on his lying down and trying to sleep. Finally, when five o'clock came, De Breulh insisted on going with him to see Modeste. They had not reached the meeting-place when they perceived her hurrying towards them. "She sleeps ! " exclaimed the maid, " and the doctors say she is saved ! "

André staggered, and M. de Breulh assisted him to a bench, on which he sank in an almost unconscious state. They never imagined that they were being observed—and yet, twenty yards off, two men—B. Mascarot and Florestan were eagerly watching all their movements.

Alarmed by the valet's letter, the agent had jumped into Dr. Hortebize's brougham, waiting at the door in the Rue Montorgeuil, and ordered the coachman to drive at full speed to Father Canon's establishment, where at that time of day he fully expected to find Florestan. However, he was mistaken. Mascarot was far too anxious to entertain the idea of waiting, and so he at once despatched a messenger to fetch the valet from the Hôtel de Mussidan.

The worthy agent did not breathe freely until he learnt that a change for the better had supervened in Sabine's condition, and that she was probably saved. He had been asking himself if the edifice he had reared after twenty years' labour and intriguing would not crumble before his eyes into a thousand pieces. Now, however, he was somewhat reassured. Still he frowned when Florestan told him of the daily interviews between Modeste and the young man whom he called mademoiselle's lover.

"Ah ! " muttered Mascarot, " I should very much like to witness one of these interviews if only from a distance."

"And why not, sir ? " asked Florestan, drawing from his pocket a dainty little watch, which his sweetheart no doubt had made him a present of. "It can be easily managed. They usually meet about this time, and always at the same spot—"

"Come then," interrupted his patron.

They went out, but thinking it wiser to avoid being seen together in the neighbourhood of M. de Mussidan's house, they took a circuitous route to the Champs Elysées. Near the corner of the Avenue de Matignon, close to the Cirque de l'Impératrice, were half-a-dozen of those little wooden shanties where old women sell cakes and toys in summer time.

"Let us go behind one of these," said Florestan, "we shall easily see them from here."

Night was coming on, and the lamplighters were already hurrying to and fro at the further end of the Avenue. Still people and things might yet be plainly distinguished. The worthy pair had waited in their hiding-place for some minutes when suddenly Florestan whispered, "Look ! there comes Modeste, and now the lover. But he has a friend with him to-night. What on earth can she be telling them ? He seems as if he were fainting. Do you see ? "

B. Mascarot saw only too well, and the scene, so passionate and tragic, highly displeased him. It is always a perilous task to trifl with the happiness of a man who really loves. "And so," said the agent crossly, "that great fellow gasping and floundering on the bench there is your young lady's lover ? "

"Precisely, sir."

"Then we must find out exactly who and what he is," muttered Mascarot.

Florestan assumed the wise look of a diplomatist, and chuckled softly.

"Oh ! you know all about him, then ?" asked his patron.

"To be sure I do," answered the valet. "The day before yesterday I was smoking my pipe outside the gate of the house when I saw this young game-cock come down the street, but he didn't hold his crest high, I assure you. However, I knew what it meant—if my young lady, for instance, was ill, I should drag one foot along after the other just as he did. Well, I thought as I had nothing else to do I would just find out who he was, and so I strolled after him with my hands in my pockets. He walked and walked till he quite tired me ; but at last he entered a house, and I, too, close at his heels. I went to the concierge, pulled my tobacco pouch out of my pocket, and showed it her, saying 'I have just picked this up—that gentleman who has just come in dropped it. Do you know him ?'

"'Of course I do,' she answered, 'he is an artist on the fourth floor—Monsieur André.'"

"But that was in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne ?" interrupted Mascarot.

"Precisely !" rejoined the valet somewhat abashed ; and he added sulkily, as though he thought he had been trifled with, "you are better informed than I am, it seems."

Mascarot was too surprised to make any rejoinder. He was struck by the strange persistence with which this same young artist came across all his plans and combinations. When the cook in the employment of Rose—now Vicomtesse Zora de Chantemille, by the grace of Gaston de Gandelu—had spoken to him of an artist, who was acquainted with the liaison of Rose and Paul Violaine, he had made it his immediate business to find out who that artist was. Taintaine had made inquiries, and even interviewed Madame Poileveu, the discreet concierge of the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, and now Mascarot discovered that this same artist was Mademoiselle de Mussidan's lover. What a strange and ominous coincidence. "Well," said Mascarot at last, "you took your tobacco pouch back from the concierge again, didn't you ?"

"Why, no, sir," answered Florestan, "I said I had found it, and of course I had to leave it with her."

"Imprudent ! most imprudent !"

"But why ?" asked Florestan. "What harm can it do ?"

Mascarot hesitated, and finally answered, "Oh, none at all, of course." He did not care to tell the fellow the truth, and yet, he was intensely annoyed that this proof of an unordered investigation should be left in Madame Poileveu's hands. The merest trifle suffices to put astute persons on the track of the most complicated intrigue. Wasn't it a mere scrap of paper which had been wrapped round a candle, that enabled Canler to ferret out the band of the Rue Saint Denis ? Wasn't it a thimblefull of cigar ashes found on a mantleshelf that betrayed Corvinsi to M. Lecoq ? "Such trifles," muttered Mascarot to himself, "often ruin a man."

But André now attracted all his attention ; the young artist appeared to be himself again, and was speaking with great animation. Modeste seemed horror-struck ; for she shrank back and raised her arms to heaven.

"But who is the other man ?" whispered Mascarot, "he looks like an Englishman '

"Why, don't you know him ? It's M. de Breuh-Faverlay."

"Bless my soul ! Do you mean the man who was to have married Mademoiselle Sabine ?"

"Of course I do."

Now, B. Mascarot was one of those adventurers whom nothing disconcerts or astonishes as a rule, and yet, on making this discovery, he instinctively shuddered as with alarm, and swore a frightful oath. "By the thunder of heaven!" he cried at last, "are De Breulh and this painter friends?"

"That's more than I know; you are very curious, it seems to me."

That Mascarot was not altogether himself was shown by this very question, for it was perfectly evident that the pair were on terms of the closest intimacy. Modeste had now left them, and they themselves turned in the direction of the Avenue de l'Impératrice, walking arm in arm.

"It looks as if M. de Breulh had easily consoled himself for his dismissal," remarked Mascarot.

"Dismissed!" said Florestan, "he wasn't dismissed! it was he who wrote and withdrew his suit."

This time Mascarot had strength enough to conceal what a blow the valet's information was. He even laughed as he asked some trifling questions of Florestan before they separated. But he was in reality absolutely upset. He had looked on his game as won, and now he saw it, not lost, but at all events frightfully compromised. "What!" muttered he, clenching his hands with rage. "Shall a lad's foolish passion stop me now, when I am so near the goal? By no means. Let him beware. If I find him in my road, so much the worse for him!"

XXI.

DR. HORTEBIZE had long since ceased to dispute the will of his admirable partner. Baptstin ordered, and—he obeyed! He had been bidden not to lose sight of Paul; and he complied with the instructions to the letter. He had gone with him to M. Martin Rigal's—where they had dined, although the banker himself was absent—thence to his club, and he had insisted on offering Paul hospitality for the night. The physician and his ward having retired at a late hour, were also late in rising, but shortly before eleven in the morning, having washed and dressed, they were about to do justice to an excellent breakfast, when M. Tantaine was announced, and made his appearance, bowing and smiling as usual.

At the sight of this man, who had first impelled him towards crime, Paul felt his blood boil, and started furiously to his feet. "I have you, sir, at last," he exclaimed. "We have an account to settle together!"

Good old Tantaine looked as if the skies had opened. "We! an account?" he asked, in a bewildered sort of way.

"Yes, sir, yes! Was it not owing to your perfidious conduct that I was accused of theft by Madame Loupias?"

"Well, what then?"

"Was it not you who came to me in my garret?"

The old clerk shrugged his shoulders. "I thought," said he, in the blandest tone, "that Monsieur Baptstin had explained everything to you, and concluded that you wished to marry Mademoiselle Flavia. I was told that you were a young man of extraordinary intelligence and penetration!"

The doctor burst into a hearty laugh, and Paul realising the folly of his indignation at this late hour, dropped his head in due confusion, and turned away.

"If I disturb you, doctor," resumed old Tantaine, "I am very sorry, but I was sent here specially by the governor."

"Is there anything new?"

"Yes. First of all, Mademoiselle de Mussidan is out of danger. M. de Croisenois can pursue his plans now without any fear. An obstacle has turned up but it will be suppressed."

The doctor swallowed a glass of his excellent Bordeaux, smacked his lips, and exclaimed : "Well, here's to the conjugal felicity of the marquis and Mademoiselle Sabine!"

"Amen!" answered Tantaine. "Another word, if you please. I am told to beg M. Paul not to leave M. Hortebize, but to send for his effects at his hotel, and install himself here." The doctor looked so annoyed that Tantaine hastened to add, "Only temporarily, of course. I am commissioned to find an apartment for this young gentleman—and directed to furnish it. He can't remain in lodgings. It's too compromising."

Paul made no attempt to conceal his satisfaction at this new arrangement. To be surrounded by his own goods and chattels would be a tangible proof of prosperity.

"Very good!" cried the doctor, gaily. "And now that you have executed all your commissions, Tantaine, you can stay and breakfast with an easy conscience."

But Tantaine shook his head. "Many thanks for the honour; but I have already breakfasted. Besides, I have no time to spare. That business of the Duc de Champdoce presses us frightfully just now, and I must see that scamp Perpignan as soon as possible."

He here made a little sign which Paul did not see, and Hortebize rose and accompanied him into the ante-room.

"Don't leave that boy," said Tantaine, in a whisper, "I will see him tomorrow. In the meantime, warm him up, prepare him—"

"I understand," rejoined the doctor. "Trust him to me;" and as he resumed his seat he called out to Tantaine—at that moment opening the outer door : "My regards to that dear fellow, Perpignan!"

That dear fellow, Perpignan, whom Mascarot had suspected of hovering round about Caroline Schimmel, the cook, and whom Father Tantaine was now going to see, was well known in Paris—and as some folks said, too well known. His name had been set down in the baptismal register as Isidore Crocheteau, but he had adopted the name of his native town. In 1845 or thereabouts, he had met with a disaster. Head cook at a restaurant in the Palais-Royal he had been detected in a flagrant system of dishonesty in connection with the tradespeople who supplied the establishment, was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. During his incarceration, however, he was able to mature a grand scheme, by which he thought he could enrich himself without the smallest risk. A week after being set free he issued the following prospectus :

[*Private and Confidential.*]

I. C. PERPIGNAN.

Private Inquiries. Searches and Surveillance.

SECURITY GUARANTEED.

SIR,—Everyone at some time of life has needed a skilful and discreet agent to whom he could confide certain investigations of a delicate and mysterious nature. Creditors anxious to discover absconding debtors, fathers anxious as to the conduct of their prodigal sons, families wishing for

information concerning one of their relatives, in one word, all who desire to investigate moral investigations, justifiable inquiries and searches, may apply in all confidence to M. PERPIGNAN, whose ability is universally acknowledged, and whose honourability is above all question.

Terms by private contract.

By this impudent circular Perpignan announced the creation of one of those shameful private police establishments, which are only employed by knaves and fools.

Perpignan wished for a specialty—he had one. He became the Providence of jealous husbands ! The ex-cook's scheme succeeded so well that at the expiration of the first year he was employing no fewer than eight of those odious spies called “*fleurs*” in the Rue de Jerusalem. It is true that he played a double game, unscrupulously selling his merchandise twice over. Whenever he was charged with watching some suspected wife he would call on her and say : “I am promised so much if I discover and tell the truth. Now, what will you give me if I agree to furnish only such information as you choose ?”

It was in the field of private inquiries and investigations that on two or three occasions Perpignan's men had rubbed against Mascarot's agents. There was never any real conflict between them, for each side was afraid of the other, and by a tacit agreement as it were, they decided in future to avoid working the same tracks. But, while the ex-cook—badly served by his light-paid spies—had never succeeded in penetrating any of Mascarot's mysteries, the latter, on the contrary, admirably seconded by his volunteers, was by no means ignorant of Perpignan's affairs.

Mascarot, had, at the outset realised, that the receipts of the Private Inquiry Office could not possibly cover Perpignan's expenses, for he lived in a brilliant style “protecting” a young woman of the *corps de ballet*, and hiring a brougham by the month. He also affected artistic tastes, which revealed themselves in the form of wonderful waistcoats and superfluous jewellery. He, moreover, admitted his partiality for good living, could never dine without drinking the best wines, and seldom, if ever, turned a cold shoulder on a gambling table. He delighted to exhibit himself, was always to be seen at the races, and in the Bois—frequented the best restaurants, and was invariably present at the first performances of the new pieces at the theatres.

“Where does his money come from?” wondered Mascarot, determined not to rest until he knew. And the worthy agent had immediately set to work, and thanks to his special means of investigation had speedily learnt the truth.

“That's how we told him,” mused Father Tantine, as leaving Hortebize's house, he turned in the direction of Perpignan's Private Inquiry Office in the Rue du Four. “Ay, we hold him, luckily for us, for master Perpignan's a dangerous rascal and might at any time do us harm if we could not threaten him with a nice little pleasure trip to Cayenne.”

The old clerk had reached the ex-cook's door, (decorated with a huge brass plate) and rang the bell. A low-looking, stout old woman, at once answered the summons : “Monsieur Perpignan is out,” said she.

“And when will he return?”

“Not before night, I think.”

“Then will you kindly tell me where I may hope to find him, as it is of importance to him, as well as to me, that we should see each other as soon as possible?”

"He did not tell me where he was going."

"Isn't he at the factory?" asked Tantaine, with an air of excessive simplicity.

The stout woman was so little prepared for this question that she started back. "How do you know that?" she stammered.

"I do know it, and that's enough, so you may as well tell me the truth at once. Is he there?"

"Yes—I think so."

"Thanks; I will find him then." And less polite than usual, Tantaine hastily turned away, omitting to bow to the woman.

"Too bad!" he muttered, "too bad! An endless distance! But if I unexpectedly catch him there, at his honest, honourable work, he'll be off his guard no doubt, and let his tongue wag on more readily. So let us walk it."

The worthy old fellow talked of walking, but in point of fact, he flew over the ground, turning up the Rue de Tournon, crossing the Luxembourg gardens and diving into the Rue Gay-Lussac. And still at the same abnormal pace, his thin legs bounded along the Rue des Feuillantines into the Rue Mouffetard, where at last he made a halt. Not for long, however. He had soon reconnoitred his position and turned into one of the narrow tortuous by-ways surrounding the Gobelins Works and the Hospital de l'Ourcine. This is a strange district which most Parisians do not even know of. A man might imagine himself at a thousand leagues from the Boulevard Montmartre as he treads the streets, or rather roads, inaccessible to vehicles, and bordered here and there with old tumble down houses and garden walls falling to ruin. From the Ruelle des Gobelins the scene is striking. In the valley below, one can distinguish the black, muddy semi-stagnant waters of the Bièvre. Factories with their tall, smoke crowned chimneys, tanneries and their adjacent out-buildings, where the newly dressed hides hang drying, rise up on all sides; and here and there among clumps of trees a hovel or a shanty may be distinguished, with occasionally some five-storeyed dwelling-house, looking singularly woe begone and out of place in such a neighbourhood. On the left stretches the populous and busy Rue Mouffetard, while on the right rise the plane trees of the outer Boulevards.

Beyond the Place d'Italie, a line of poplars, marking the course of the Bièvre, limits the horizon; but turn round, and all Paris is stretched out before you. Father Tantaine involuntarily paused and looked, and some strange, mysterious thought brought a bitter smile to his lips. However, a moment later, he shrugged his shoulders and hurried on his way. He seemed quite at home in the neighbourhood, never hesitating, but following with an air of complete assurance these tortuous lanes. Diving into that break-neck alley, the Ruelle des Reculettes, he passed the Rue Croulebarbe, and at last, reaching the Rue du Champ de l'Alonette, he heaved a sigh of satisfaction and muttered, "Well, here we are at last."

He had paused in front of a three-storeyed house of large proportions, faced by a court-yard, with a rotten, wooden fence. The building was a detached one, the spot was lonely, almost sinister. Father Tantaine deliberated for a moment, and then, crossing the court-yard where a tethered goat was browsing at some weeds, he entered the house. The ground floor comprised only two rooms, in one of which the floor was strewed with straw, covered with ragged rugs and blankets. In the other room, apparently a kitchen, a couple of long boards resting on trestles formed a kind of table. Before the range stood a hideous old hag with a flaming com-

plexion, the result of unlimited libations, and a pair of ferret's eyes gleaming with cruelty and cunning. She wore a coloured kerchief on her head, and in one hand held a wooden spoon with which she stirred some horrible mixture simmering in an immense cauldron. On a pallet in one corner, a little urchin, some ten years old, lay shivering. Against the ragged pillow-case, black with dirt, his face of a death-like palidity appeared in bold relief. His little hands were painfully thin, and fever glittered in his big black eyes. At times his sufferings made him moan, but at once the old hag turned round and threatened him with her wooden spoon.

"Shut up, will you, you young rascal!" she cried.

"But I am in such pain," sighed the boy, with a marked Italian accent.
"I am really very ill—"

"Well, why didn't you work as you were bid? You wouldn't have had a thrashing if you had brought some money home. And if you hadn't been beaten you wouldn't be lying there!"

"Oh me! I'm sick—I'm cold—I want to go away—I want to see mamma!"

Old Tantaine had seen much misery in his life, and was not easily moved, but even he was touched by this scene. He coughed to announce his presence, whereupon the old woman turned round with a snarl like that of a hungry dog disturbed over a bone.

"Who do you want?" she growled.

"The governor."

"He hasn't come yet."

"Will he be here?"

"Perhaps—it's his day; but he's not by any means regular. However, you can see M. Poluche."

"Poluche! Who's he?"

The old woman gave Tantaine a contemptuous glance. It seemed to her most extraordinary that such ignorance could exist. "He's the professor," she answered.

"And where is he?"

"He? Why, upstairs in the schoolroom, of course." And turning to her cauldron, the contents of which were boiling over, she added, "That's enough questioning. Just show me your heels, please."

This curt dismissal did not seem in any wise to offend Tantaine. However, before climbing the stairs he examined them, and noticed that the bannisters had been torn away, and that they were altogether in a most rickety condition. But Father Tantaine was brave, and so he cautiously climbed them, keeping as closely as possible to the wall. The higher he went the more distinct became certain strange sounds which he had already heard in the court-yard. It seemed as if a number of cats were mewing whilst a knife-grinder busily plied his calling. Every now and then there came a dead silence, followed by a loud oath and cries of pain. However, this *charivari* did not seem to astonish Tantaine, who, on reaching the floor above, found himself in front of a door hanging loosely by one hinge. He pushed this door open, and entered what the old hag downstairs had called the schoolroom. It was an immense apartment; in fact, all the rooms on the floor had apparently been thrown into one, the partitions having been torn down. There were five windows with but three panes of glass intact; the others were cracked and broken; some of them covered with rags and paper, and all absolutely begrimed with filth. On the white plastered walls figured innumerable inscriptions and rough drawings, often obscene, whilst

the room had a sickly disgusting smell which caught one at the throat and almost provoked nausea. The only article of furniture was a broken chair, across which lay a stout riding-whip.

Father Tantaine had met with some strange sights in the course of his wanderings through the low quarters of Paris, and yet he paused on the threshold of this room, fairly thunderstruck. All round against the wall, a score of young urchins, from seven to ten years old, were ranged—all of them clad in rags and tatters, and filthy beyond description. Some of them were arrayed in old frock-coats, the tails of which dragged on the floor, whilst others had trousers, the waistbands of which well nigh reached their throats. None of them wore such a thing as a shirt, socks were apparently unknown to them, and several were absolutely bare-footed. They mostly carried violins in their hands, a few of them supporting harps taller than themselves. On the violins Tantaine noticed a number of chalk-lines at regular intervals.

In the centre of the room stood a man of about thirty—straight, slim, and erect as a candle; excessively ugly, with flat features, and greasy black hair falling over his neck behind. His coat, originally olive-green, hung on his shoulders as if on a couple of pegs. Like the children, he held a violin, and Father Tantaine at once divined that this must be Professor Poluche giving his lesson.

"Attention!" cried the *maestro*. "Now each in turn. Ascanio, just play the refrain of the *Chapeau de la Marguerite* over again, and in measure, mind." So saying the professor began to sing and play, whilst the child he had named scraped his violin in desperation, and with the nasal twang of Piedmont screeched, "Ah, mon Dieu ! mon Dieu ! qu'il est beau, le chapeau de—"

"Rascal!" interrupted Poluche. "Haven't I told you a hundred times that at the word 'chapeau' you must place your left hand on the fourth notch and draw your bow. Begin again."

The child began: "Ah, mon Dieu ! mon Dieu ! qu'il est—"

"Stop!" shouted the professor in a threatening voice. "Stop! I believe you do it purposely. Now begin again, and if you don't repeat the whole refrain correctly, look out, that's all. Go on."

"Ah, mon Dieu—"

Alas! Ascanio had forgotten his instructions and again made a mistake. The professor laid down his violin, quietly took up the riding-whip lying across the chair, and in all calmness, without the slightest semblance of anger, cut the child five or six times across the legs, with the result that the luckless urchin at once set up a lamentable roar. "That'll teach you," said Poluche, "to pay more attention to what I say. When you have got through your howling you can begin again, and if you don't do better, you shan't have a mouthful of soup to-night. This is a fair warning. Now, instead of braying like an ass, open your eyes and ears and look at your neighbours. Now, Giuseppe, it's your turn."

Although two or three years younger than Ascanio, Giuseppe was far more skilful both with his instrument and voice, and he played and sang the whole refrain without a single mistake.

"Good!" said Poluche; "and now, if you improve as much in the next two or three days as you have done during the last week, you shall go out. You would like to go out, I suppose?"

"Oh! yes, indeed, sir," answered the child with great delight. "I should like to bring in a few sous, too."

But the conscientious professor did not mean to waste his valuable time in vain converse. He turned to another of his pupils. "Fabio," he cried, "it's your turn, and in time, remember."

Fabio, a tiny little fellow, not more than seven, whose black eyes were as bright as a mouse's, did not evince particular haste in obeying this order. The fact is, he had just caught sight of Father Tantaine on the threshold, and he thought it more imperative to call the professor's attention to this intruder. "Oh! master," he exclaimed, "a man!"

Poluche at once turned, and found himself face to face with Tantaine, who now came swiftly forward, his hat in his hand. A spectre darting up through the floor could not have made the professor feel more nervous. He had, indeed, especial reasons for being afraid of strangers. "What do you want?" he asked in a startled voice. "Who are you?"

The *maestro's* evident alarm delighted worthy Tantaine, for he looked on it as a favourable augury respecting the result of the hazardous mission he had undertaken; and, moreover, it showed him what tone he had best adopt in speaking to Perpignan when the latter arrived. Such being the case, it pleased him to prolong the perplexity of the situation, and for a good minute at least he remained smiling blandly at the discomfited professor, who was each instant becoming more anxious. However, at last he relented. "Be at ease, my good sir," said he. "I am one of your patron's intimate friends, and have only taken the liberty of calling here because I have important business affairs to discuss with him."

Poluche breathed more freely. "If that's the case, sir," he said, offering the visitor the only chair in the room—the very rickety one aforesaid, "take a seat; the master will soon be here."

But Father Tantaine refused, politely protesting that he was afraid of intruding, that he did not care to sit down, and that he would withdraw rather than interrupt such an interesting lesson.

"Oh! the lesson's as good as over," replied the professor. "It is time for Mother Butor to give these scamps their porridge." And turning to his pupils, who had not dared to move, he added, "Enough for to-day. Be off with you."

The children did not wait another second. They laid down their instruments, and, like schoolboys eager for play, bounded out of the room and down the rickety stairs at the risk of breaking their necks. Perhaps they hoped that their master, occupied by his unwonted visitor, would forget certain threats he had made. The hope was vain! Professor Poluche, severe, but just, was endowed with an extraordinary memory. He went out on to the landing and called down the stairs, "Hallo! Mother Butor!"

"What's up?" asked the old hag in the kitchen.

"You will give no porridge to Morel, please, and Ravouillat is to have only half his allowance."

Having given these important orders, he returned to the schoolroom with the self-satisfied air of a person who has thoroughly performed his duty. "Our youngsters from Piedmont and Calabria," said he to Father Tantaine, in explanatory fashion, "get on well enough; but those make-believe Italians from Batignolles and Montrouge whom the governor has been recruiting lately, give me no end of trouble. He says they're cheaper, but they'll really kill me with worry. They are puffed up with pride and impertinence, and as vicious as if they were men. As for their heads, they are as hard as stone, and besides they've no taste for music, nothing musical in their natures."

Tantaine's eyes were wide open behind his spectacles. All this was new to him; and as he believed in the maxim that 'tis never too late to learn, he listened to Professor Poluche with due attention. "Your's is a difficult task," he said. "It must be very trying to teach music to children so young."

The professor raised his eyes to heaven in despair. "Would to God," he cried, "that I could teach them the divine art, its first principles, all so dear to my soul. But no; the master doesn't wish it, in fact he would dismiss me if he caught me doing anything of the kind."

"But it seems to me you were teaching when I came in."

"Let me explain myself. You have heard, I presume, of those old women who train singing birds with reed-organs and whistles, and so on."

No; Tantaine had never heard of them, and confessed his ignorance in all humility. "Ah, well," resumed the professor with a bitter smile, "I teach boys instead of birds, that's all—teach them not by rule, but by ear so to say—that is much as you teach a parrot to talk. It's a sad business, sir, for a man of any imagination. There are days when I envy the parrot teachers. Ah! what patience I need to be sure."

The gentle Tantaine smiled and pointed to the riding whip. "And this?" he asked.

Poluche shrugged his shoulders. "I should like to see you in my place for twenty-four hours," said he. "The master picks up a boy, and he brings him here. Well, what then? The child's in despair, nervous and worried and so on, and yet in a couple of weeks or three, at the most, I must teach him to play something. Perhaps he never saw a violin before; at all events he knows nothing of music. Never mind. I must teach him, mechanically, the 12 or 15 positions which the simplest tune requires. Naturally the young beggar resists, and I as naturally insist on obedience. Can you drive a nail into a board without a hammer? No. Very well, my whip's my hammer, and with its help I drive the tunes into my pupils' memory. But don't imagine for a moment, that these imps are afraid of punishment. By no means. They thrive on blows as other children thrive on caresses. They howl if they are touched—indeed as soon as ever I raise my arm, but not a real tear ever falls from their eyes. I find other modes of punishment vastly more effectual than the whip. I manage them through their stomachs. I suppress a quarter, a third, or half of their porridge, and sometimes, but not often, the whole of it. It is astonishing how swiftly fasting sharpens their faculties. If they are especially obstinate, I keep them at work at night time. There's nothing like that. In a single night an obstinate young imp will learn more than at four lessons in the daytime. The method's infallible. It was given to me by the manager of a circus who employed it successfully in teaching a horse to play the hurdy gurdy."

Tantaine, during this long explanation, had felt a cold chill creep down his back. His prejudices were not strong, but he felt that this system of education was not altogether satisfactory.

"Ah," resumed the professor. "if I could only do as I choose about the tunes."

"Eh?" asked Tantaine.

"Why, don't you understand? I have 40 pupils who start out each morning, and never come home before midnight. As soon as I have drilled them to play some tune, it becomes popular. Now lately I've been teaching

them the ‘*Chapeau de la Marguerite*’ and, come, don’t you hear it played and hummed wherever you go?’

Tantaine now understood how it happened that certain tunes were at different intervals heard through the length and breadth of Paris.

“Ah!” resumed Poluche, “Ah! if the governer would only let me, I would give the French a taste for good music. But then he has no mind for art. He won’t have it. Why, he almost dismissed me one day, when I played these young beggars an air from one of my own operas.”

Time was passing, but Tantaine showed no signs of weariness. “From one of your own operas?” said he.

“Yes,” answered Poluche, in a different tone to that in which he had so far spoken. “There isn’t a musical theatre that hasn’t an opera of mine in its archives. One of my friends, who went crazy from absinthe, wrote lovely librettos for me. No, don’t laugh. I received a first prize at the Conservatoire. I had illusions in those days, and wanted to become famous; I drank water and worked all night. But the day came when I grew weary of waiting for fame, and then I tried to give lessons. Alas! I was so ugly and disagreeable that no boarding school would engage me. I was literally dying of hunger when I met the governor. He tempted me, and I yielded. I have five francs a day regularly, and two sous more for each pupil. It’s a disgraceful trade, no doubt, I loathe it, and myself too, but at all events, I don’t starve.”

He stopped short, listened for a moment, and then uneasily exclaimed, “Here comes the master! I know his step. If you wish to see him, go down and meet him. He never comes up, for he’s afraid of the stairs.”

XXII.

PROFESSOR POLUCHE’S master might be judged at a single glance. He was plainly enough a rascal—not an ordinary one, far from it, for he combined in his appearance the air of a charlatan, a hair-dresser, a police spy, and a horse-dealer. Physically Perpignan was a short, apoplectic looking man, very stout and red, with an impudent mouth and a cynical eye. He over-dressed himself and to look at him one might have imagined that he had pillaged a jeweller’s shop, and adorned himself with the spoils. When he spoke, he drew a sepulchral bass voice from the innermost depths of his stomach, where his mind was apparently situated. He looked as snobbish and as vulgar as ever, as Tantaine—now carefully descending the rickety stairs—caught sight of him in the hall below.

Poluche had felt anxious on seeing the old clerk, and Perpignan his master, looked positively frightened. However, their reasons were not the same. The ex-cook knew that Tantaine was Mascarat’s right arm. “Thunder!” he said to himself. “If this old fellow has taken the trouble to come here for me, it must be for some powerful reason. I must be careful.” And feigning a smile, he offered Father Tantaine his hand. “Delighted to see you!” he said aloud. “How can I serve you? For I sincerely trust you have come to ask me some service.”

“Oh! the merest trifle,” answered Tantaine, returning the smile.

“So much the worse, then; for I am really very fond of Monsieur Mascarat—very fond indeed.”

This friendly parley had taken place in the hall, and the shouts and the laughter of the children, devouring the contents of Mother Butor’s cauldron,

could be plainly heard, coupled with repeated groans and sobs. "A thousand thunders!" shouted Perpignan in a voice which would have shaken every pane of glass in the windows, had there been any. "What's up, now—who's complaining?"

As no answer came from the kitchen, Professor Poluche deemed it right to speak. "The urchins who are blubbing there," said he, "are a couple of our Parisians whom I have put on short allowances. They shan't have a mouthful until they have learned—"

He stopped short, struck dumb by his master's threatening look. "On short allowances!" repeated Perpignan—"do you dare, under my very roof, without my knowledge, to deprive these poor children of an ounce of their food? It's infamous! simply infamous, Monsieur Poluche! What on earth do you mean by such audacity?"

"But, master," stammered the professor, "you have told me a thousand times—"

"Told you? Told you what? That you were a fool, eh? So I have, and I've always added, that you'd never be anything else. Now hold your tongue, and go and tell Mother Butor to give those cherubs their grub."

The scene was a regrettable one, irreparable in every sense, and yet, although inwardly enraged, Perpignan tried to seem calm, and taking Father Tantaine by the arm drew him to the end of the passage. "I presume you came to see me on business," he said. "Very good. Well come into my office here."

He thereupon opened the door of a dirty little room, dingy and dilapidated like the rest of the house. Three chairs, a deal table, and some shelves on which lay three or four ledgers, composed the furniture. Tantaine and Perpignan sat down, and for a moment looked at each other without speaking, each seeking to penetrate the other's secret thoughts. Two duellists sword in hand, awaiting the signal of their seconds, could never have been more watchful. However, so far as these preliminaries were concerned the advantage was entirely on the side of Tantaine, who was so to say, entrenched behind his goggles. Perpignan, therefore, was the first to speak, "How did it happen, that you learned of my little establishment?" he asked.

"Oh! by the merest accident," answered Tantaine, carelessly. "A person who goes about as much as I do naturally hears of a good many things. For instance, we know very well that you have taken every precaution to avoid being compromised."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. You are, of course, the promoter, the master in reality, but apparently you are nothing at all. To the outside world a man named Butor, your cook's husband, is the manager, and the lease of the house is in his name. Now if anything disagreeable happened, you would disappear, and the police would only be able to lay their hands on Butor, your man of straw. Such tactics usually succeed, unless a man has an enemy skilful enough to render his precautions useless, by producing absolute proofs of collusion."

The ex-cook was too quick witted not to understand this threat. "These people know something," he thought: "I must find out what it is." And he added aloud, "The best way after all, is to have a clear conscience; as for myself, having nothing to conceal, I have nothing to fear. You have seen my establishment—what do you think of it?"

"It seems to me well started."

"Indeed it is. No doubt a good factory at Roubaix would have been more profitable, but then a man has to consider his means and do the best accordingly."

Tantaine nodded. "It isn't a bad trade," he said.

"No not bad—but then there's a deal of competition, which sadly diminishes the little profit you make. Why, I've plenty of competitors in the Rue Sainte-Marguerite. But I never liked the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Here my cherubs have better air."

"Certainly; and besides," added Tantaine, with an innocent look, "if they howl when they are punished, there are no neighbours to hear them."

Perpignan thought it best to take no notice of this observation. "The newspapers," he continued, "have seen fit to make an everlasting row about us. But really, they had far better confine themselves to politics. Who on earth are we injuring? No one in the world. The truth is, they exaggerate our profits, which don't amount to much."

"Nonsense! you make your living."

"Of course I'm not out of pocket; but I assure you that there is really very little to be made. For instance, just now six of my cherubs are sick in hospital, and then there is another in bed in the kitchen. These are, of course, a dead loss to me."

"You are, indeed, to be pitied!" said Tantaine, gravely.

The old man's coolness annoyed Perpignan more and more. "Zounds!" he cried, "if you and Mascarot think the speculation such a good one, why don't you try it for yourselves? You seem to think any number of children can be found, but you are mistaken, my dear sir, much mistaken. You must go to Italy, get them together, and smuggle them across the frontier as if they were contraband goods. It is simply ruinous!"

Perpignan spoke intentionally in this open confiding manner. He anticipated questions as if he wished to conquer his visitor by his seeming frankness. But Tantaine was not to be diverted from his object by a flow of words, and as Perpignan paused to draw breath, he swiftly intervened. "And how many pupils have you?" he asked with a simple air.

"Oh, forty or fifty," answered Perpignan.

"Dear me," rejoined the old clerk, "you manage matters on a grand scale. What sum have they each to bring home every night?"

This question was so indiscreet, that Perpignan hesitated. "It depends," he answered.

"Well! you can tell the average?"

"Call it three francs, then."

Tantaine's smile was so genial, that it was impossible to suspect him of any duplicity, as he replied: "Let us call it three francs then, and say you have forty cherubs; so they bring you one hundred and twenty francs a day."

The old man's gentle obstinacy surprised Perpignan. "That is absurd!" he exclaimed. "Do you think each of my boys brings in that sum?"

"It would be absurd if you hadn't the means of compelling them to bring it."

The ex-cook started. "I really don't understand you," he said, in a somewhat anxious voice. "What do you mean?"

"Ah! no offence of course," answered Tantaine, courteously. "Only I should be telling a frightful falsehood if I said that public opinion is in your favour. Between us, the *Gazette des Tribunaux* does you a deal of harm. It has acquainted the public with some of the practices your colleagues re-

sort to in view of encouraging their lads to work. Did you hear about that master who sometimes fastened his boys on an iron bed, and left them a day, two days, and even three days, without food. What was he sentenced to?"

Perpignan, who was by this time wretchedly ill at ease, now hastily rose to his feet. "Do I know?" he cried. "What do I care for these stories? Never once have I committed a single act of cruelty."

Tantane settled his spectacles. "A man may have the kindest heart in the world, and yet be the victim of circumstances," he answered.

The decisive moment was evidently approaching as Perpignan instinctively realised: "I don't understand you," he said once more.

"Well, then, let me give you an example. Suppose you had reason to complain of one of your cherubs to-night. What would you do with him? Shut him up in the cellar, perhaps. Where would be the harm? Well, you would go to bed and sleep, with a quiet conscience, like a log. But in the night, say the rain pours down in torrents. A pile of sand or stones stops up the gutter in your street, and all the rain water flows into your cellar. In the morning, when you go to let your cherub out, you find him stiff and dead. He has been drowned."

The ex-cook's usually red face had now become absolutely livid. "And what then?" he asked.

"Ah! here it is that the annoyance begins. Naturally, it would be difficult to decide on what course to pursue. It would be a simple thing to send for the police, but then an inquiry would take place, and the attention of the public prosecutor would be called to your establishment. So after all, it's better to dispose of the body. No one knows that the child's there. A hole's dug, the body's buried, and there's an end to the matter. Come, hasn't anything of the kind ever happened?"

Perpignan had gone to the door, and was leaning against it as if to prevent the old clerk from retreating. "You know too much, Monsieur Tantaine," he said, "a great deal too much!"

There was no mistake about the ex-cook's tone of voice, and besides, his attitude, in front of the door, was more significant than any explanations. However, Tantaine did not seem to notice his hostile manner. Quite the contrary. He smiled benignly, as pleased with himself, apparently, as a child is after some frightful piece of mischief, the extent of which he is absolutely ignorant of, whilst its consequences he cannot calculate. "After all," said he, "it's a mere nothing. At the utmost, manslaughter by imprudence and the public prosecutor would have to be awfully clever to obtain a severer sentence than five years' imprisonment. Still, if certain antecedents were raked up—a certain journey to Nancy, for instance—"

This was too much for Perpignan, who forthwith exploded. "A thousand thunderclaps!" he cried. "Explain yourself—what do you want of me?"

"A little service, as I said before."

"Indeed! and is it for 'a little service' that you intimidate and threaten me in this way, as if you meant to blackmail me?"

"My dear sir—"

"You forget one thing, and that is, I am not easily intimidated—"

"Allow me to make an observation. Was it not you yourself who first spoke of your—well, we will call it business, if you like! I didn't mention it to you."

"Then it was merely by way of making yourself agreeable that you have been telling me all these absurd tales?"

Tantaine shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," resumed Perpignan, trying to control his voice, "shall I tell you, in my turn, what I think?"

"By all means, if it doesn't trouble you too much."

"I will tell you, then, that you have come here on an errand that no man should undertake alone. To come and say to anyone, face to face, the things that you have said to me, you ought to be younger and of a different build. It wasn't a prudent thing to do, to venture into such a house as this—"

"But—heavens and earth! what could happen to me?"

Perpignan did not answer. His face was convulsed, his eyes were blood-shot, and his lips white with rage. He was in one of those fits of passion when a man neither knows nor cares what he does. He had slipped his hand into his pocket; but Tantaine, indifferent as he seemed, had watched each movement he made, and as Perpignan was about to draw his hand out again—his eyes shining the while with fiendish hate—the old clerk started from his seat and sprang forward. The ex-cook, with his bull's neck, was of uncommon strength, but as the old fellow clutched hold of him he staggered. However, a great effort enabled him to draw himself together, and he struggled desperately, lunging out with his one free fist at hap-hazard. But it was all in vain. Tantaine had caught him by the neck-tie, had twisted it round, and was so fairly throttling him, that a rattle came from his throat. The struggle was soon over. With wonderful vigour for a man of his age and appearance, Tantaine twisted his adversary round, making him spin like a top, and then suddenly clutching hold of him again, on either side below the ribs, lifted him off the ground, and flung him on to a chair. That was all; not a cry, not a word. No one, however, would have recognised worthy Father Tantaine; he seemed transfigured, and in lieu of a benign expression, his features now wore a look of unutterable contempt and disgust. "Ah, you wanted to stab me, did you?" said he to Perpignan, who was trying to regain breath, "you wanted to kill an inoffensive old man who had never harmed you. Did you think I was simple enough to venture into your lair without any precautions?" And producing a revolver he added sternly, "Now, throw your knife down!"

Tantaine was right. It was a sharp-pointed knife that Perpignan had tried to open in his pocket, but he was now so demoralised, so cowed, that he obediently tossed the weapon into the corner without more ado.

"Good!" said Tantaine, approvingly. "I'm glad to see that you are becoming reasonable. Is it possible that a sensible man like yourself—. Come, you hadn't reflected. I came here alone, to be sure, but plenty of people knew I had come. If I hadn't returned home to-night, do you suppose my master, M. Mascarat, would have been satisfied. To-morrow morning he would have felt anxious, and in forty-eight hours, at the most, you would have been under lock and key. It's lucky for you I prevented you from stabbing me; I've saved you from the police, imprisonment, and the scaffold, and now I've a fair right to insist on your doing as I bid you."

The ex-cook looked intensely mortified and humiliated. He had been beaten and laughed at; two things that to the best of his recollection had never happened to him before. "Oh! the weaker man must go to the wall," he said, sulkily.

"Exactly. But you should have realised that before."

"I was excited and angry, and you threatened me. I foresaw you meant to exact something—something—"

"You are quite mistaken," rejoined Tantaine. "In point of fact I came here to propose a magnificent stroke of business to you."

"Indeed—But why did you begin talking as you did?" asked Perpignan.

"Because," answered Tantaine, with an imperious wave of the hand, "because I wished to prove to you, to your own satisfaction, that you belong to Mascarot more entirely than your poor Italians belong to you. They are your serfs, you are his slave. You are at his mercy, my man; he holds you in his hand, and can crush you like an egg whenever he pleases. He knows all about you, and has every possible proof."

"Your Mascarot is the devil himself, I believe; nobody can resist him!" muttered the ex-cook.

"Ah! then, as this is your opinion, we can talk sensibly, at last."

Poor Perpignan straightened his collar and neck-tie, and seated himself at the table. "Come," muttered he, trying to turn the whole affair into a joke, "you've made a halter of my neck-tie, and I'm at your mercy. Do what you like with me, abuse me and insult me. I can't retaliate."

But Tantaine was not the man to take undue advantage of a victory. He had arranged his plan of action before entering the house, and as events had somewhat belied his expectations, he reflected before resuming operations. "Now," said he, "let us forget what has just happened, and begin at the beginning. For some days you have been watching a woman named Caroline Schimmel."

"I?"

"Yes, my innocent son—you! You employed the eldest of your cherubs as a spy to follow her—a fellow of sixteen, who plays on the harp, and answers to the name of Ambrosio, which is not his own."

"It's true enough."

"That youngster's not to be trusted, let me tell you. He accepts an offer of a glass of wine too willingly; and besides the drink soon gets into his head. The other evening as we were afraid his absence might make you uneasy, we were obliged to hoist him into a cab, and send him as far as the Rue des Anglaises—a stone's throw from here."

The ex-cook clapped his hand to his forehead as if suddenly enlightened. "Then it's your people," cried he, "who have been watching this woman as well."

"Have you waked up to that conclusion?"

"I knew well enough that I was not the only one who was tracking her. But what could I do about it?"

"You can tell me, now, at all events, why you are watching her."

"Why? Because—confound it all! You know the motto on my circular, 'celerity and discretion.' You are after a secret which isn't mine, which, in fact, has been entrusted to my honour."

Tantine lifted his eyebrows. "Why do you talk of discretion," said he, "when you follow Caroline entirely on your own account, hoping to arrive, through her, at the solution of a mystery, only a very small portion of which has been confided to you?"

The ex-cook was astonished, and yet, he still tried a little finessing. "Are you sure of that?" he asked.

"So sure that I can tell you, that the client, whom this mystery concerns, was brought to you by a lawyer, M. Catenac."

Perpignan was altogether defeated; his features now expressing, not

mere surprise, but absolute confusion and alarm. "Thunder and lightning!" cried he, "What a wonder that Mascarot is. 'Pon my word he knows everything! everything!"

Tantaine had produced the desired effect, and pulled at his spectacles with evident jubilation. "No," said he. "The governor doesn't know everything, and in proof of this, I have come to ask you to tell me what took place between Catenac's client and yourself. This is the service we expect from you."

"Oh you may rely on me, dash it all! Mascarot knows what he's after, and I bet on him. Come, I'll be frank. This is the whole story: One morning, some three weeks ago, I had just got rid of a dozen clients at my place in the Rue du Four, when my woman brought me a card. I looked at it and read, 'Catenac, Advocate.' 'Don't know him,' said I, 'but let him in all the same.' He came in, and after a little conversation he asked me, if I thought I could find a person who had been lost sight of for several years. Of course I said I could. Thereupon he asked me to be at home the next morning at ten, as a person would call upon me in reference to the matter. The next day, at the hour appointed, a respectable, but somewhat impoverished-looking man made his appearance. He was about sixty—in an old frock-coat, carefully brushed, and a hat rather the worse for wear. At first sight, he looked like some old fellow of the civil service, living on a scanty pension—a case of shabby gentility in fact. However, I took a squint at his linen—bless my soul! it was as white as snow, and as fine as satin. Then I looked at his boots and saw they had plainly come from one of the best shops in Paris. As for his hands and nails, they were admirably cared for. 'Ah! ha!' I said to myself. 'You thought to catch me, did you, with this disguise, you innocent old man? But I am too smart for you, by far.' However, I politely gave him my own arm-chair, and he at once proceeded to disclose his business. 'Sir,' he said, 'I have not had a very happy life, and at one time I was so poor that I was obliged to send to a Foundling Hospital a little boy who was very dear to me—my own by a mistress whom I adored, and who is dead. This happened twenty-four years ago. Now I am old and alone. I have a moderate income and would give, willingly give, half my fortune to find this child again. Now is this possible?'"

Although he had been a cook, and was now the head of that flock of Italian boys, Perpignan was an eloquent speaker. He was highly flattered by the close attention with which Tantaine followed his words, and was by no means sorry to prove to him that in some respects he was quite equal to the redoubtable Mascarot. He, therefore, chose his words and enunciated his syllables with extreme care.

"You understand, my dear sir," he resumed, after a pause, "that this story interested me extremely. I said to myself, that all I should probably have to do would be to go to the hospital where the child had been left, and that the man must be poor indeed, if half of his fortune did not prove ample reward for a trifling expenditure of time and money. Accordingly I said I would undertake the job, and promised indeed a satisfactory result, providing I was allowed a little time. But I was rejoicing too soon, as you will see; the old fellow was sharper than I had imagined. After letting me talk on for a moment, he exclaimed. 'You didn't let me finish. When I have explained to you all the circumstances, you will probably realise that the task is not so simple as you think.' Thereupon I of course told him, that with the extraordinary resources I had at

command no one could escape me ; that my emissaries were over all Europe, and that I had but to extend my hand to grasp the bird that was wanted, however securely it might be hidden—and I was really saying no more than the truth—for without boasting, my office is so organised.”—

“Keep to your story,” said Tantaine impatiently. “I know all that !”

“Very well ; I will leave you to imagine all I said to my client. He listened to me with considerable satisfaction, I assure you. ‘I trust,’ said he, ‘that you are as skilful as M. Catenac affirms, and as powerful as you claim to be, for there never was a better chance for a man to demonstrate his perspicacity than you have now. As you may believe, I have done all I could ; but in vain. To begin with, I went to the hospital where my child was placed. They remembred him at once, and showed me the register with the date ; only, no one knew what had become of him. He had run away from the hospital when he was twelve years old, and since then had not been heard of. Every attempt made to discover him after his flight had failed ; and no one could tell me whether he was living or dead.’”

“A nice little problem to solve !” interrupted Tantaine.

“It is a problem that it is impossible to solve,” answered Perpignan. “How on earth can one ferret out a boy who disappeared ten years ago, and who, if living, is now a man ?”

“More difficult things than that have been accomplished,” observed Tantaine.

His tone was so decided that Perpignan looked up suspiciously. He wondered if the affair had been offered to Mascarot also, and if the agent of the Rue Montorgueil had managed matters more successfully than himself. “Possible or not,” he said sulkily, “but as I don’t pretend to be as strong as your master, I felt as if the ground was being cut away from under my feet, and as if there was nothing for me to grasp at. However, I put a bold face on the matter and asked if it were possible to obtain a description of the boy. The old man answered me that he could furnish me with one, accurate in every particular, for many persons—the matron of the hospital among others—remembered him perfectly well. He could also give me some other details which would be useful.”

“And these you received, of course ?”

“Not yet—”

“You are joking !”

“By no means. I don’t know whether the old boy was keen enough to read in my eyes that I hadn’t the smallest hope of success or not, but, at all events, he positively refused to tell me more at the time, declaring that he had merely called that morning to consult me. ‘An affair like this,’ he said, ‘requires most serious and careful consideration. Every step must be taken with caution and secrecy. There must be no applying to the police, and no advertising in the newspapers.’ I at once answered that my establishment was a tomb of secrets, whereupon he quietly rejoined that he took that for granted. Then, after saying that he wished me to draw up a plan of investigation to be submitted to M. Catenac, he took a 500 franc-note from his pocket-book and laid it on the table, to recoup me, he said, for my loss of time in listening to him. However, I pushed it back, though it cost me a pang to do so ; but it was either too much or not enough, and I thought I should do better later on. Still he insisted, saying that he would see me again soon, and that in the meantime M. Catenac would consult with me. He then rose and went away, leaving me

less in thought about the search he had proposed than in wondering who on earth he might be ; and that was the end of it.”

Tantaine was convinced that Perpignan was telling the truth. However, he noted that one essential point had been omitted. “And you took no steps to find out this old fellow’s name ?” he asked.

Perpignan hesitated for an instant, but deciding that it was of no use attempting to conceal anything from such a well-informed man as Mascarot’s envoy he frankly replied, “My client had hardly got down the stairs, when I put on a blouse and a cap, and followed at his heels. He walked straight to the Rue de Varennes, and entered one of the most magnificent houses there, just as if it were his own home.”

“And it was his own home,” exclaimed Father Tantaine, “and you had just had the honour of being consulted by the Duc de Champdoce.”

“You are right ; the duc is one of my clients, which is no doubt flattering for me. However, may the fiend strangle me, as you almost did a little while ago, if I understand how you found out all this.”

“Oh !” answered Tantaine, modestly ; “It was purely by chance-fortune favoured me. But one thing I don’t know, and that is what connection is there between the duc and Caroline.”

The ex-cook raised his eyebrows. “Then, why did you set a spy on her ?” he asked with a touch of sarcasm. My own reasons for doing so are simple enough. I immediately found out all I could about the duc, and learned that he was immensely wealthy and led a most regular life. He is married and loves his wife, so I hear. They had an only son, whom they lost a year ago, and since then they have been inconsolable. Accordingly I said to myself : ‘This duc, who abandoned his child years ago, now wants to find him again, as his legitimate heir is dead !’ Don’t you think my conclusion correct ?”

“It is logical, unquestionably. But, after all, you have given me no explanation in regard to Caroline Schimmel.”

Perpignan was no match for Mascarot’s keen emissary, but he was nevertheless, acute enough, to see that he was being subjected to a series of questions which had been prepared in advance. He did not rebel, merely because he dared not ; besides, if he made his statement full and sincere, the greater was his chance of some tangible reward. “You may believe, Monsieur Tantaine,” he resumed, “that whilst learning what I could of the duc’s present situation, I also inquired into his antecedents. I also wanted to find out something about the mother of the lost child ; but I am sorry to say that I didn’t succeed.”

“What ! not with all your resources ?” exclaimed Tantaine with a smile.

“Laugh at me, if you like, but out of the thirty servants in the Champdoce mansion, there isn’t one who has been there for more than ten years. Now what has become of the duc’s former servants ? At first no one would tell me. I was annoyed and disheartened, when one day while I was in a wine shop in the Rue de Varennes, I heard mention made of a servant, who was with the duc five-and-twenty years ago, and who still received a small annuity from him. This servant was Caroline Schimmel. I found out her address, and since then I have had her followed.”

“And what do you expect to make out of her ?”

“Not much, I admit. And yet this annuity looks as if she had rendered some especial service to her master or mistress. Can it be that she had any knowledge of the birth of this natural child ?”

“Your supposition is in the highest degree improbable,” answered Tantaine, with well affected carelessness.

"However," added Perpignan, "I have never seen hide nor hair of the duc, since that one visit."

"But Catenac has sent for you?"

"Yes; three times."

"He must have given you further directions? Hasn't he even told you in what hospital the child was placed?"

"No; and on the occasion of my last visit I told him frankly that I was tired of being kept in the dark, whereupon he said that he himself was tired, too, and was sorry he had ever meddled with the matter."

This last information by no means astonished Father Tantaine. M. Catenac had plainly made that answer with Mascarot's recent threats in his mind. However, the old clerk judged it expedient to appear as if he shared Perpignan's discontent. "Don't you think it rather singular that the duc and Catenac should beat about the bush like that?" he asked.

"I'm not so surprised about Catenac. I don't fancy he knows much more than myself. The duke is probably afraid of confiding the truth to any one. There must be something serious about the mystery. For my own part I should be afraid of finding the boy, no matter how much I wanted him. He may be in prison or at the galleys by now. What else would be likely to happen to a boy, scamp enough, at twelve years' old, to run away from a place where he was well treated?"

Perpignan, the tyrannical master of forty luckless little street musicians, was qualified to judge of the misery and iniquity likely to fall to the lot of so young a lad. "However," he resumed, "I had thought out a plan of investigation. With money, patience, and skill, a man can do wonders."

"I agree with you."

"Well, then, let me tell you, this was my idea: I traced, so to say, an imaginary circle round the town or city where this child was left, and I said to myself, I will enter every house in every village, every inn, every secluded farm or cottage, and ask, 'Do any of you remember in such and such a year having sheltered, lodged, and fed a child, dressed in such and such a fashion, looking like this, and so on?' Well, at last, I should unquestionably come on some one who would answer me, 'Yes, I remember?' Now, if once I obtained a clue, if once I reached the end, or rather the beginning of the thread, I would engage to unravel the skein however entangled it might be."

This method seemed so ingenious and so practical to Tantaine, that he involuntarily exclaimed, "Good! Very good!"

The ex-cook did not dare to accept this tribute of praise as genuine. Tantaine had such a singular fashion of expressing praise and blame, that it was difficult to decide whether he was sincere or not. "You are very kind," said Perpignan. "Do you want me to believe I'm a fool? Do you really think me an idiot? At all events, I have an occasional inspiration. For instance, in reference to this boy I had a notion, which, if properly worked out, might have led to something."

"May I venture to ask what it was?"

"I presume the idea will be safe with you. Well, I said to myself, it would be almost impossible to find the lad, but on the other hand it would be comparatively easy to substitute another—a lad skilfully trained so as to answer all requirements."

This scheme was so utterly unexpected by Tantaine, that the worthy old fellow half bounded off his chair and precipitately resettled his spectacles, as he always did in emergencies, desirous, perhaps, of assuring himself that

his eyes were well screened and could not betray his thoughts. "It would have been a bold, a most audacious thing to do," said he.

Perpignan had duly noticed Father Tantaine's start, and had accepted it as an involuntary homage to his powers of imagination. Had he been more skilful, or at all events, less weighed down by a sense of his own inferiority, he would have realised that this question of substituting one child for another deeply interested Tantaine—indeed that it was connected with some weak point in the old man's armour. However, as it so happened, Perpignan divined nothing. "Ay, the idea was a bold one," he rejoined, "but I had to give it up."

"You were afraid, then?"

"Afraid! I afraid? You don't know me!"

Tantaine became more and more bland. "If you were not afraid," he asked, in honeyed tones, "why did you give it up?"

"Because there was an obstacle—sir, an insurmountable obstacle."

"I don't see it, I confess," answered Tantaine, desirous of probing all Perpignan's thoughts.

"Don't see it? Ah! of course not. I forgot to tell you something very essential. The duc stated to me most distinctly that he would be able to ascertain the identity of the boy by certain scars."

"Scars of what kind?"

"Ah! you ask me too much now, I can't tell you for I don't know."

Upon this reply Tantaine rose hastily, thus hiding his agitation from his companion. "I have a thousand apologies to make, my dear sir," he said, with the most careless air in the world. "I am in despair at having taken up so much of your valuable time. My master took it into his head that you were after the same hare as himself, but he was mistaken, and so now we leave the field clear for you." Before Perpignan could offer any rejoinder, the old fellow was in the passage, "If I were in your place," he added, "I should stick to the first plan you mentioned. You will never find the child, but you may easily bleed the due to the extent of several thousand francs, and I don't suppose they'd come in amiss. And now, once more, my apologies, and good-bye."

Was the ex-cook duped by these words? Tantaine did not trouble himself to inquire. All he was anxious about was to prevent Perpignan from guessing his thoughts, or noticing the agitation he could barely control. Hence this abrupt departure. "There are scars, are there?" muttered the old clerk, as he hurried along the Ruelle des Reculettes, "and I never knew it, never suspected it, and Catenac, the traitor, never warned me."

XXIII.

B. MASCAROT explained his mode of operation in a sufficiently simple and graphic manner, when he compared himself to the manager of a puppet show, who, invisible to the audience, holds all the wires in his own hand, and moves them at will. Whenever, by will or chance, a fresh performer appeared in a play that Mascarot took an interest in, the new comer had no sooner set his feet on the stage, than the agent, to use his own expression, "hitched a wire on to him," or in other words, he placed the intruder under the discreet surveillance of one of his guardian angels. Accordingly, in less than two hours after André left Modeste at the corner of the Avenue Matignon, he had at his heels a spy, who was ordered to report each of his

acts—even the most insignificant—to Mascarot himself. This spy was no other than Beaumarchef's colleague, La Candèle, a trustworthy youth as Mascarot fully believed. He was told to be especially cautious, and keep himself well out of sight. But there was small need of caution, for the knowledge Sabine was out of danger so absorbed André that he paid little attention to other matters. Besides, he was more hopeful than ever in reference to the future. He had a friend now, M. de Breulh-Faverlay; a confidante, Madame de Bois d'Ardon—two allies, whose influence properly exercised might well be decisive. He had become warmly attached to De Breulh; their common anguish during the last three days had brought them very closely together, and created a friendship between them such as time alone generally cements.

"And now to work!" thought André. "I have lost too much time already."

He had dined with M. de Breulh and felt in the best possible spirits. "To-morrow," he said, as he took leave of his host, "if you should chance to look up as you pass along the Champs Elysées, you will see me on a scaffolding at work above you."

André was busy half the night in completing the designs he wished to submit to M. Gandelu, the wealthy contractor. However, he rose at an early hour, and, unveiling Sabine's portrait, wished it a cordial good-morning, and then started out, with his portfolio under his arm, to call on the happy father of that young rake, Gaston. The contractor, who had almost become celebrated since he had built that charming theatre "*Les Comédies Parisiennes*," resided in the Chaussée d'Antin. When André rang the bell, the servant who appeared strongly urged him to postpone his business. "I don't know what has come over monsieur," said she, "but never, never, have I seen him in such a mood, during the whole five years I have been with him. Now just listen!"

At that very moment there came a loud succession of oaths and exclamations, mingled with the crash of glass, and the dull thud of furniture thrown on the floor in an adjoining room. "Monsieur has been going on like that for an hour, at least," continued the servant; "in fact, ever since his lawyer, M. Catenac, left him. So if I were you—"

But André was in no mood to wait. "I must see him," said he. "Show me in at once."

The servant complied with evident reluctance, and opened the door of a large, superbly decorated room, in the centre of which stood the architect, gesticulating furiously with the back of a chair, which he held in his hand. Although over sixty, M. Gandelu certainly did not look more than fifty. He was a perfect Hercules—muscular and square shouldered, with hairy hands, each well nigh as large as a shoulder of mutton. He always looked hampered in his satin-lined coats, and seemed to regret the loose blouses of his earlier days. He was proud of his success and fortune, which was enormous; and he had a right to be so, since they were the outgrowth of two good things—work and economy. Even those who envied him were forced to admit that not a single five-franc piece in his pocket, back to the very first one he had earned, had a speck of mud upon it. But, proud as he was of his wealth, he never dinned one with an enumeration of his belongings as parvenus usually do; on the contrary, he delighted in conversation to recall the days when he was poor and friendless. He was vulgar and brutal no doubt, as quick as gunpowder, with no education whatever; but under this coarse husk he concealed some noble sentiments. He was

generous to a fault, and his probity was above all question. He certainly swore like a pagan, his grammar was atrocious, but he had never refused to do any one a good turn, and oftentimes dispensed his bounties in the most delicate fashion. To be brief, his hands were hard and horny, but not his heart. As he perceived the door open he bawled at the top of his voice : “What fool is coming to disturb me now ?”

“ You gave me an appointment,” began André, who saw that he had done wisely in insisting on coming in, for, on recognising him, the contractor’s brow immediately cleared. “ Ah ! it’s you, is it ? All right ;” and then in a softer voice he added, “ take a seat, if there is a steady chair left in the room. I like you, for you have an honest face, and you look healthy and never shirk work. You needn’t blush, young man, though modesty’s no fault.”

In vain did André seek to check the course of the contractor’s praises. M. Gandelu was not to be silenced. “ Yes,” he insisted, “ you have something in you. Any time when you want a hundred thousand francs to go into business with, they are ready for you. If I had a daughter, she should be your wife. I should simply say to you, ‘Here, my boy, take her and her dowry, and I’ll build you a house !’”

André did not know M. Gandelu well enough to understand whence this storm was blowing from. “ I am very grateful to you for your good opinion, sir,” said he ; “ and as for your kind offers of assistance—well, as you may know, I have had to learn to depend upon myself.”

“ True,” said Gandelu, in a voice that was full of anguish, “ you never knew your parents. You never knew all that a father—a kind father—would do for his son. You would have loved your father, I think ; yes, I’m sure you would—” He paused, and then suddenly asked, “ Do you happen to know my son ?”

This question was the key-note to the whole scene, and André instantly realised that he was in presence of a justly irritated father, who took a bitter satisfaction in comparing his unworthy son to a young man whose intelligence and energy excited his admiration. The young painter well remembered the dinner given by Rose, and also the language which young Gaston had then used ; but as it was no part of his business to be a “ tell-tale,” he hesitated before answering M. Gandelu’s question. Would it not be better to say that he was altogether unacquainted with the young fop ? No ; the lie would probably prove a useless one. Accordingly he quietly answered that he had only met Monsieur Gaston on two or three occasions.

“ Gaston !” cried the contractor with an oath. “ Never pronounce that name again in my hearing. Do you really suppose that I, Nicolas Gandelu, ever named my son Gaston ? He was named Pierre, after his grandfather the bricklayer ; but this name didn’t suit the young fool—it wasn’t fine enough for him. He wanted a sweet little name, a distinguished name, like those of the fellows who sneer and laugh at him. Pierre is common, and smells of work and honesty ; but Gaston sounds prince-like, and smells like pomade. Dear Gaston ! sweet Gaston !” As he spoke these last words, imitating a woman’s voice, the contractor’s expression was so intensely funny that André, albeit moved by compassion, had great difficulty in repressing a smile. “ But if that were all,” resumed M. Gandelu, “ I should shrug my shoulders and let it go. But have you seen his visiting cards ? They bear the name Gaston de Gandelu, with a marquis’s coronet in one of the corners. Marquis, indeed ! The idea ! Why, I, his father.

am no duke, nor even a count, nor a baron. You know well enough that I began life as a hod carrier."

"Young people," André ventured to say, "all have their little weaknesses."

But M. Gandelu was not the man to be soothed by such a commonplace remark. "No!" he thundered; "you can't excuse him. The fellow blushes for his father. A name that's pure and spotless isn't enough for him, he'd prefer to be some titled reprobate's son. He talks about his society—and what society it is! Dissolute women and profligate men! I know his friends—as idle and worthless as himself. They go about curled and pomaded and scented like dolls. What caricatures they are! And it's for their sake that he calls himself a nobleman! When a restaurant waiter addresses him as 'Monsieur le Marquis,' the idiot flies into raptures. He never once sees that the waiter is laughing at him in his sleeve. The fool! Why, if these associates of his flatter him and make much of him, it isn't on account of his wit or his good looks, as he conceitedly imagines—no, not at all; they simply worship his father's wealth, the gold of his father—the mason."

André's situation was becoming more and more distressing and awkward. He would have given a great deal to have been able to withdraw; for he said to himself, "These confidences are prompted by anger, and by-and-bye M. Gandelu will feel sorry he has acquainted me with his secret sufferings."

However, the contractor still rattled on. "The young fool's only twenty," he said, "and yet he's utterly used up and *blasé*. He's old, his eyes are bleared, and his hair's gone. He stoops as he drags himself about, and spends his nights in drinking. But it's my fault; I've been too indulgent; I've always allowed him to have his own way. If he had asked me for my skin to make a carpet out of, I shouldn't have refused him. As soon as he could speak, he had only to say he wanted anything to have it. I lost my poor wife, and had only him left. Do you know what I've allowed him here? Apartments fit for a prince, two servants, and four horses for his own use; in addition, 1,500 francs a month for his cigars and trifles, and he has usually wheedled me out of about as much more, and yet the scamp goes about calling me a miser. Why, he runs into debt to such an extent that he has already anticipated every sou of his poor mother's fortune."

M. Gandelu suddenly stopped short. Hitherto apoplectically crimson, he now turned ghastly pale; his lips quivered, and his eyes gleamed most ominously. The fact is, the door had opened, and who should saunter in but young Gaston—otherwise Pierre—in person, with his hat on his head and a cigar between his teeth. As usual, he was attired in the most eccentric fashion, and his features wore an expression of intense self-satisfaction.

"Good-morning, father," said he. "How are you to-day?"

But his father drew back. "Don't come near me," he answered, with a shudder.

Gaston paused, somewhat surprised, and looked at André. "Out of temper are you? Is it the gout, father, or business worry?"

Gandelu raised the chair-back, he still held, so threateningly that André darted between father and son.

"Don't be afraid," said Gandelu in a gloomy voice; "I haven't taken leave of my senses yet;" and either to reassure the young painter, or else because he distrusted himself, he threw his impromptu weapon into a corner.

Gaston had undoubtedly been startled by his father's gesture; but he

was not a coward, and did not easily lose his assurance. "Bless my heart!" he murmured. "Infanticide! I did not expect this little family fête, as Dupuis at the Varieties says, in—"

He did not finish his sentence, for André snatched hold of him by the wrist and fiercely exclaimed, "Not another word!"

But the gloomy pause that followed was not to the taste of M. Pierre Gandelu. "Yes," he resumed, "silence and mystery! However, I should like to be informed what it all means."

M. Gandelu's reply was addressed to the young painter, not to his son, "I will explain everything to you, M. André," said he; "you will pity me and understand me. Ah! I suppose my sufferings are the portion of a great many fathers. It is part of our destiny to build on sand and see it swallow up everything we had prepared for our children's future. Our sons, who should be our glory, become, as it were, our punishment—the punishment of our pride!"

"Not bad, not at all bad," muttered Gaston; "especially for a man who hasn't studied elocution."

Fortunately his father failed to hear this fresh piece of impertinence. He resumed as follows in a curt, hoarse voice: "That unhappy lad, M. André, is my son. I swear to you, by his mother's memory, that for twenty years he has been my one thought; for twenty years my heart and head have been full of him. I have lived for him entirely. Well, no matter. But do you know what he did last week? Why, he made a bet—he made a wager on my death, just as you might back a race horse."

"Oh! come now, that isn't true," exclaimed Gaston.

His father waved his hand contemptuously. "At least," said he, "have courage enough to own your crime. You thought I was blind, my lad, because I didn't choose to tell you, 'I can see.' And you kindly opened my eyes for me!"

"But, father—"

"Oh! don't deny it. This morning my lawyer, M. Catenac, called on me, and he had the moral courage which only true friends possess to tell me the dreadful truth. I know everything."

M. Gandelu spoke in such a horrified tone, and seemed so overwhelmed, indeed, as if happiness was never more to be his lot on earth, that André asked himself in dread what revelation was going to follow. That it would prove terrible seemed almost certain, for even young Gaston's superb air of assurance now altogether failed him.

"I must tell you, M. André," resumed the contractor, "that last week I was seized with a terrible attack of gout, such an attack as a man seldom pulls through—gout rising to the heart; you know the case, no doubt. For three days the doctors thought it was all UP with me, and I thought so myself. I had made my will, and felt myself crumbling to bits like an old building. Well, while I was in this state my son never left me. He remained at my bedside, looking dreadfully sad, and in spite of my intense sufferings, his attentions made me feel happy. He loves me, I said, after all! He has not much sense; but, at all events, his heart is in the right place. If I died, he'd cry for me, I'm sure of it. Yes, I said all this to myself. Ah! what a simpleton I was! He was not watching over me to preserve my life. He was lying in wait for my death, which would give him entire possession of my fortune. If he looked sad, it was only because he was being harrassed by creditors. And when he left me, it was only to negotiate a loan, and to tell every one how ill I was, and that there was no

possibility of my recovery. In fact, he went to a usurer named Clergeot and applied for a loan of a hundred thousand francs, on the assurance that I had only a few hours to live. I had in my hands, not an hour ago, the paper on which the conditions were specified. They were, that if I should die within a week, my son would give twenty thousand francs commission. If I lived another month, he agreed to pay a hundred and fifty thousand francs. But if, by any unlucky chance, I recovered, Clergeot's claim should amount to two hundred thousand."

The unfortunate contractor was stifling, and, anxious for relief, he tore off his necktie and gasped for breath. Then, producing his handkerchief, he wiped away the perspiration which had gathered on his forehead. "This man will never forgive me," thought André, "for having been the involuntary confidant of so sad a story."

But the young man was mistaken. Primitive natures never suffer in silence; they require the relief of words. All that Godelu had said to André he would have said to any man he esteemed, who might have come in at that moment.

"Before advancing such a sum as this—for a hundred thousand francs is no trifle—the usurer wished to ascertain if matters were such as my son pretended. He asked for sureties, for a medical certificate. My son found a means of satisfying this usurer. He talked to me of a physician, a specialist, who would understand my case perfectly, he said; at the same time begging me to see him. My son had never seemed so kind, so affectionate; he insisted with such tender earnestness, that at last I yielded, and one evening said to him: 'Bring me your wonderful doctor, if you really think he can cure me.' And he brought him! Yes, Monsieur André, he found a physician base enough to be made a tool of, and this physician I can expose to-day if I choose, to the contempt of the public and the indignation of his *confrères*. He came, and remained nearly an hour. I can see him now leaning over my bed, asking innumerable questions and feeling my pulse. At last he went away, leaving an insignificant prescription; he went away followed by my son. They both met Clergeot in the street, where he was waiting for them, to learn the result of this monstrous consultation. Do you know what the usurer was told? why, the doctor said to him, 'You can advance the coin, the old boy can't possibly recover.' And this is why, five minutes later, my son returned happy and smiling, and joyfully exclaiming: 'It's all right, father! You will soon be out again!' I am out again, in spite of the doctor's assertion; for, strange as it may appear, I began to improve that very night, and it so happened that Clergeot had asked for forty-eight hours in which to raise the cash. Meanwhile he learned of my recovery, and thus my son lost his money."

There were tears in the poor old father's eyes as he told this dismal story. It was a sorry sight indeed. He remained silent for a few moments, and then, in a heart-broken voice, he turned to his son: "Was it courage you lacked, my boy? You could easily have hastened the death you so earnestly desired. You didn't know, possibly, that one of my medicines was a deadly poison, and that ten drops instead of one would have freed you from me."

André was watching Gaston. He took it for granted that he would throw himself at his father's feet and implore his pardon. Not so, however, for Gaston stood impassive, pale, and with lips compressed. He seemed humiliated and irritated, but not moved or touched. In fact, he was at that moment absorbed in wondering how the story of this negotiation with

Clergeot had reached Catenac's ears, and how he had managed to procure the original agreement. The contractor had thought, with André, that his son would ask his forgiveness. But seeing that Gaston remained obstinately silent, M. Gandelu's anger poured forth again. "Do you know, my dear André," he asked, "what my son would like to do with my fortune? Why, he wants to offer it to a creature he has picked out of the gutter, a woman whom he is pleased to call a viscountess. Viscountess de Chantemille! Marquis Gaston! They are worthy of each other."

Gaston was touched now. "You sha'n't insult Zora!" he exclaimed.

His father laughed. "I sha'n't?" he repeated. "Dear me. Please understand I shall do precisely what I please with your Zora. You are not twenty-one yet, and I shall simply have your viscountess shut up in gaol."

"You won't do that!"

"Indeed I will; you are a minor, but your Zora, whose real name, by the way, is Rose, is much older. The code is precise, and I have read it."

"But, father!"

"It's of no use: my lawyer has filed a complaint, and before night your viscountess will be safe behind some stone walls."

This blow was so cruel and so unexpected that tears of resentment stood in Gaston's eyes. "Zora in prison!" he cried.

"Yes, at the Dépôt of the Préfecture to begin with, then before the Tribunal of Correctional Police, and finally at Saint-Lazare. Catenac told me the routine."

"It's shameful!" cried Gaston. "Zora in prison! Well, all right, just try it. Bring her before the tribunal, you'll see I and all my friends will be there. Yes, I'll go and sit beside her and prove she's an honest woman, I'll prove that all this is so much fiendish malice on your part. I'll say I love and esteem her, and that I mean to marry her when I'm one-and-twenty. The papers will write articles about us. Go on! I rather like it, on the whole. Great as a man's self-control may be, it isn't without its limits."

M. Gandelu had restrained himself as long as possible, and even while telling his son that he knew the horrible villainy he had been guilty of, he had, both in word and gesture, been far milder than the young reprobate deserved; but these absurd and cynical threats were more than he could endure. The blood rushed to his brain, he lost his head, and rushed towards the chair-back which he had flung aside a moment previously. But André was on the alert, and quick as thought he opened the door with one hand, and with the other pushed Gaston into the passage outside, so that when the contractor turned with his arm raised to strike he found himself alone with the young painter.

"What have you done?" he exclaimed. "Don't you see that he'll go to that creature and warn her, and she will have time to escape? I must prevent that!" and as André, fearing he knew not what, tried to restrain him, the old man, with his muscular arm, shoved the young fellow aside, and rushed out of the room, shouting to his servants.

André was overcome with horror. No doubt he was neither a Puritan nor a simpleton. Having greatly suffered, he had considerable experience of life. Young as he was he had met with a fair number of rascals. He knew some of those libertines who are the scourge of their families, some of those cracked brains whom passion toys with, but never before had he found himself thus face to face with the excesscs of one of those prematurely withered young dandies, brainless and heartless, who flatter themselves

that they are the flower of modern French chivalry, although they have even more degrading vices than the lowest of the low. He had been amused by their follies as caricatured on the stage, but he had never thought of the odious side of their conduct. He had no conception of the amount of impudence and vanity, cold rascality and absolute selfishness, embodied in the person of a "*petit crevé*," a "*gommeux*." Better than any one else, probably, he could form an accurate estimate of Gaston's conduct, for at thirteen he had been thrown on the world, and had often longed for the family ties which had been denied him. However, he had now no time for reflection, for M. Gandelu returned with a composed countenance and air of genial roughness, acquired only by a very great effort. "Let me tell you how things are now," he said, in a voice that quivered despite himself. "My son is locked into his room, and an old servant of mine, a fellow who carried his hod once upon a time, and whom he can't persuade or bribe, has mounted guard at the door."

"But don't you fear, sir, that in his excitement and anger—"

The contractor shrugged his shoulders. "Ah! you don't know him. You would make a great mistake if you supposed he at all resembled any man you know. What do you think he is doing now? Why, lying on his bed face downwards, and howling for his Zora. Zora indeed! I ask you if that's a name for a Christian woman? What do these creatures give these boys to drink that deprives them of every manly quality? If his mother hadn't been a saint on earth I should really ask myself if he were any son of mine."

He dropped on to a chair, and laid his head on the desk in front of him.

"You are in pain, sir?" asked André.

"Yes; my heart's bleeding. However, I've been a father quite long enough, I mean to be a man now. Catenac has told me precisely what I ought to do. Ah! my son wants to get hold of my fortune to squander it! We'll see about that. The law's on my side. To-morrow I shall summon a family council, and my son will be pronounced unfit to control himself, unfit to have the free disposal of money. 'Putting him under interdict' they call it. After that he sha'n't have a penny, and he'll see when his pockets are empty if his society will worship him and call him '*marquis!*' Marquis indeed! As to the girl, that '*viscountess*,' she shall pay for the rest of them! To jail with her!" He stopped short and remained for a moment pensive. Then in a sad tone, he added: "I have thoroughly weighed the consequences of my complaint to the public prosecutor: they are appalling. My son will do as he threatens—I'm sure of it. I can see him now, sitting by the side of that infamous creature, looking at her lovingly, telling her aloud that he adores her, glorying in his folly and shame before all Paris. I know that the newspaper reporters will gloat over the scene, that they will turn it into ridicule, and that it will all reflect on me, of course—that my name will be dishonoured—"

"But is there no other course?" André ventured to ask.

"No; none whatever. If all fathers had my courage, we should have no profligates. In this matter M. Catenac agrees with me. Still, it is absolutely impossible that this idea of the physician and the loan could have originated in my son's brain. He is a mere child, and some one must have advised him." The father was already seeking an excuse for his son. "However," resumed Gandelu, "I musn't dwell on this any longer, or I shall become half crazy again, as I was before. I will see your drawings another day; now let us go out." He rose, and looked around the room,

"See," said he, "the state I've put things into ; such handsome furniture, too ! Whenever I saw a spot on any of it, I used to rub it with my coat-tails ; but when I'm in a passion, I'm like a wild beast—I must destroy something or other. Then snatching hold of André's hands, and crushing them almost in his grasp, he added : "My dear fellow ! you probably saved my son's life and my own. When I rushed forward, it was with murder in my heart—all was red before my eyes—I wonder I didn't have a fit of apoplexy. I know very well that one can never repay such services, but I shall set it down to your credit. Come with me, I want to look at my house in the Champs Elysées, and we will breakfast on our way."

This house, the ornamental sculpture of which had been intrusted to André, stood at the corner of the Rue de Chaillot and the Avenue des Champs Elysées, and was still shrouded in scaffoldings. A dozen workmen, already engaged by André, were dotted here and there. They had been waiting for him ever since the morning, and were surprised at his non-arrival, as he was punctuality itself. They now greeted him right cordially, for they were all his associates. André of course responded in friendly fashion, but M. Gandelu, although he was never reserved nor haughty with his work people, seemed on this occasion to take no notice of them. He rambled through the house, pretending to inspect the work which had been accomplished since his last visit, but his mind was really elsewhere—with his son in the Chaussée d'Antin. Soon he tired of this make-believe inspection, and returning to André, exclaimed : "I'm going, I don't feel well. However, I'll see you to-morrow."

So saying, he departed, with his head bowed low, and seeming altogether so crushed, that his workmen remarked it. "He doesn't look right," one said to another. "Since his attack of gout he hasn't been the same man. He must have had a great shock, and no mistake."

XXIV

ON reaching the house André had taken off his coat and put on his blouse, which was rolled up in his toolbox. "We must work hard," he remarked, "to make up for lost time." So saying, he applied himself to his task, with considerable energy. But he had not got fairly into harness when a young apprentice ran lightly up the scaffolding to say that a gentleman wished to see him. "And a smart gentleman he is, too," added the boy.

André was intensely annoyed at being disturbed, but when he reached the pavement and saw M. de Breulh-Faverlay, his ill-humour was at once dispelled. It was with real pleasure that he advanced to meet his new friend, who had behaved so gallantly and generously, not merely withdrawing from his claim to Sabine's hand, but becoming the most useful and devoted of allies. "Ah ! this is really most kind of you," cried André. "Thanks for remembering me ;" and showing his hands all white with plaster, he added. "You will excuse my appearance, I trust, but—" The words died on his lips. He had now caught a full view of De Breulh's face.

"What is it ?" asked the young painter anxiously. "Is Mademoiselle de Mussidan worse?—has she had a relapse ?"

M. de Breulh shook his head sadly, and his expression clearly said, "Would it were only that."

However, the only bad news André dreaded was touching Sabine's

health. If she were still improving, what could he have to fear? Nothing certainly—and so he patiently waited until it pleased his new friend to speak. "I have been here twice for you," said De Breulh. "We must have a brief talk; it is most important you should come to a prompt decision on a matter of great interest."

"I am entirely at your orders," replied André considerably surprised and troubled.

"Then come with me. My carriage isn't here, but it will not take us more than fifteen minutes to walk to my house."

"I will follow you, sir. I only ask for a moment's delay for time to run up four flights of stairs."

"Have you any orders to give!"

"None, sir."

"Why go, then?"

"To put on a more presentable garment than this blouse."

M. de Breulh shrugged his shoulders. "Does it annoy or inconvenience you to go out in that costume?"

"By no means, I'm accustomed to it; it's entirely on your account."

"If that's all, then come on as you are."

"But, my dear sir, you will be stared at."

"Let them stare."

"People will say—"

"Let them say what they please!" interrupted De Breulh, and without waiting to hear another word from André, he passed his arm through his and dragged him off.

The young painter's previsions were correct. The two friends had not gone ten paces, before a dozen persons had already turned to look at this distinguished nobleman who was walking arm in arm with a youth in a blouse and a grey felt cap. De Breulh had also foreseen this result. Men occupying such a prominent position as his own rarely do things carelessly. They are perfectly well aware that their most insignificant acts will excite comment, and are therefore in the habit of resisting their first impulses. So if De Breulh saw fit to take André's arm in this familiar way, it was because it entered into his plan of action that the world should talk of their surprising intimacy. He knew that people would at once make inquiries about André, and he proposed to answer all curious questions in a way that would greatly benefit the young painter's future. The baron's conduct seemed so premeditated to André that he was profoundly puzzled, and lost himself in a labyrinth of conjectures, each one more unlikely than the others. He endeavoured to question his companion, but De Breulh answered in a tone that admitted of no second attempt in that direction: "Wait until we are indoors."

At last they arrived, without having exchanged twenty words on their way. They entered the library, and the door having been closed, M. de Breulh did not allow his friend to endure further suspense. "This morning, about noon," he began, "as I was crossing the Avenue de Matignon, I saw Modeste, who had been watching for you for more than an hour."

"It wasn't my fault—"

"Never mind! When she saw me, however, she came to me at once. She was in despair at not seeing you, and knowing our friendship, she trusted me with a letter for you from Mademoiselle de Mussidan."

André shivered. This letter was the bearer of evil tidings—he felt it

instantly—and these tidings he was certain that De Breulh already knew them. "Give the letter to me," he whispered, hoarsely.

De Breulh handed it to him. "Courage! my friend, courage!" he said.

With trembling hands André broke the seal, and read:—"My friend,—I love you, and I shall never cease to love you with my whole heart and strength; but there are duties—sacred duties—which every Mussidan must fulfil. I shall fulfil those which fall to my lot, even should the doing so cost me my life. We shall never meet again, and this letter is the last you will ever receive from me. Before long you will hear of my marriage. Pity me! Great as will be your despair, it will be as nothing compared to mine. God have mercy on us! Try and forget me, André. As for myself, I have not even the right to die. One more word—oh, my only friend, the last word I shall ever speak to you—good-bye! SABINE."

If M. de Breulh had insisted on taking André home with him before delivering this letter, it was because he had received some hint of its contents from Modeste, and feared that its perusal would provoke some violent outburst of grief. Certainly as André read on, he became absolutely livid. His eyes were wild for a moment, and he shook from head to foot, but not a sound escaped his lips.

It was in automatic fashion that he at last held out the letter to De Breulh, so that the latter might read it. The baron obeyed, more alarmed by André's calmness than he would have been by an explosion. "Don't allow yourself to be discouraged, my friend—" he began to say.

But André stopped him. "Discouraged! I discouraged? You don't know me. When I knew Sabine to be ill—dying, perhaps, and I away from her, I was indeed discouraged. But while Sabine tells me she loves me, I know no such word." De Breulh opened his mouth to speak, but André proceeded: "What marriage is this which Mademoiselle de Mussidan announces to me as if it were her sentence to death? Her parents must have already intended to break with you when you took the initiative. Can this new match be a more brilliant one? Hardly. She certainly knew nothing of it when she confided her secret to you. What terrible thing has happened since then? My brave and noble Sabine is not one of those weak girls who are married against their will. She has said to me a hundred times: 'If they attempt coercion, I will leave my father's house in full daylight, and never again cross its threshold,' and she cannot have changed so quickly. No! we are the victims of some abominable intrigue."

M. de Breulh had already indulged in these very same reflections, and though he had told André the truth, he had not told him everything. Modeste had purposely handed this letter to the baron. Warned in some measure of its contents by her young mistress, the faithful girl had pictured to herself what would most likely be André's despair, and so she had laid in wait for M. de Breulh—had told him all she knew, and then, with tears and sobs, entreated him to watch over André. "You are his friend, sir. In heaven's name watch him." This caution had induced M. de Breulh to insist on André's going home with him.

"Of course, sir," said the young painter, "you have noticed the strange coincidence between Sabine's illness and this despairing letter. You left her smiling and hopeful, and an hour, or less than an hour later, she falls on the floor as if struck by lightning. Horrible nervous convulsions bring her to the edge of the grave. Then as soon as she has recovered her senses, she writes this letter." The young painter stood with his eyes fixed on vacancy, and he seemed with his outstretched arm to be following some

shadow, or some faint glimmer of light unseen by his companion. "Do you remember, sir," he continued, "that while Sabine was delirious, her father and mother watched at her bedside in turn, and would not allow even a servant in the room? Modeste told us that, as you know."

"Yes; I remember she did."

"Very well—isn't that sufficient proof that there is some secret between the count, the countess, and their daughter? A secret they guard as jealously as they would their honour?"

De Breulh had also said this to himself; and his suppositions had a more tangible foundation than André's. He knew the count and countess well. He knew much of their domestic life, and he knew what was said of them in society. "I have long had reason to suppose, my dear fellow," he answered, "that one of those painful secrets which are to be found, alas! in only too many households, likewise exists in the Mussidan family."

"What kind of secret?"

"Ah! I can't say; but I am convinced there's something."

André turned away and strode up and down the room. He recalled each interview he had ever had with Sabine. He reviewed each trivial word that had ever dropped from her lips in reference to her parents. He even tried to recall each syllable uttered by old Madame de Chevauché at the Château de Mussidan. He endeavoured to connect phrases and words together, and his work was much like that of a man, who tries to unite a number of broken and scattered links once more into a perfect chain. At last, after eight or ten turns he suddenly paused, and faced his host again. "There is a mystery," he exclaimed, "a mystery which you and I will penetrate! I will leave no stone unturned until we succeed. Listen to me, and if I advance anything which is not clear to you, or any point in which you differ from me, pray call my attention to it. Now, are you convinced in your own mind that Sabine loves me?"

"Entirely so."

"Then you think that it is under imperious necessity that she writes that letter?"

"That's clear."

"You were accepted by both the count and countess as their future son-in-law?"

"Precisely."

"Now I ask if M. de Mussidan could have anywhere found a more brilliant match for his daughter—a match that would combine such advantages of person, mind and manners with such a fortune and position?"

De Breulh could not repress a smile.

"This is no time for modesty," said André impatiently. "Answer me."

"Very well then. I admit that, according to the judgment of society M. de Mussidan would find it difficult to replace me."

"Then tell me why it is that neither the count or countess made any effort to retain you?"

"Wounded pride I presume, and—"

"No," interrupted André; "for Modeste says that the day your letter came, the count was about to call on you to retract his promise."

"Yes, if we can believe Modeste, that's true."

André started up, as if to give more weight to his words. "Then," he exclaimed, "this suitor who has appeared so suddenly on the scene, will marry Sabine, not only against her will, but against the will of her parents themselves! And why? Where can this man with this mysterious power come

from? His influence is too great to be of an honourable character, so if the count and countess resign themselves to this indignity, it is because they cannot help themselves. Moreover, this constraint must be of a purely moral nature, for Sabine would submit to no other, I'm sure of that. Her duty has been pointed out to her. She submits, sacrifices herself, and this man, whatever his name, is plainly a perfect scoundrel!"

All this seemed quite logical as De Breulh admitted. "Now," he asked, "what do you propose to do?"

Andre's eyes flashed fire. "Nothing, just yet. Sabine asks me to forget her. I shall seem to do so. Modeste has confidence enough in me to serve me and hold her peace. I can wait. The wretch who thus wrecks my life doesn't even know of my existence. On this I ground my hope and strength. I shall only reveal my existence to him on the day I crush him to the earth!"

"Take care, Andre!" exclaimed his friend; "take care! The least outbreak will ruin your cause for ever."

The young painter threw back his head haughtily. "There shall be no scandal, I assure you. At first I said to myself, 'As soon as I know who this man is I will go to him, insult him, and fight a duel with him; I will kill him or he, me!'"

"It would have been the height of madness, and would have rendered your marriage an impossibility."

"Perhaps; but that is not what holds me back. I don't choose that a dead body shall stand between me and Sabine. Blood on a marriage robe brings misery. Besides, to cross swords with this man, if he be what I suspect, would be doing him too much honour. No, the vengeance I shall take will be better than that. I shall never forget that he nearly killed Sabine." The young artist was silent for a moment, and then resumed: "Yes, he must be the vilest of men to have abused his power in this way. And men don't reach such a height of infamy at one leap. His life must be full of shame and dishonour. I will make it my task to tear off his cloak, and hold him up to the contempt of the world!"

"Yes, that's what ought to be done."

"And we will do it, sir, God willing. I say 'we,' because I rely on you. I repelled your generous offers in my studio—and I was right. But now, after the proofs of friendship you have given me, it is very different. I should be a proud fool if I did not ask you for advice and assistance. We two, working together for a common cause, ought to succeed. We are neither of us so wedded to luxury that we are incapable of going without sleep or food if necessary. You and I have each known two masters whose teachings are rarely forgotten—Poverty and Sorrow. We can keep our own counsel, and act." Andre waited, possibly expecting some objection, but as his friend did not speak he continued: "My plan is simplicity itself. As soon as we know the man's name, he is our's. He won't suspect us, and we will attach ourselves to him like his shadow. There are detectives who, for a small sum, undertake to ferret out a man's whole life. Haven't we as much penetration and judgment as they have? We two can manage this task wonderfully well, for we can operate in such totally different spheres. You high up, and I low down. You, in your world of clubs and salons, can pick up information that I could never hope to gain. You will have the social, the brilliant side of our enemy, to deal with, and I will study the other side of his life; I will trace out his past in full detail. I can talk to the servants in the hall, to the coachmen in the wine shops,

No one will suspect me ; I belong to ‘the people,’ and my blouse and cap are no disguise.”

M. de Breulh started up in intense excitement. It was a great thing for him to find an object of such interest to occupy his empty life. This task would absorb the days he so often found endless and wearisome. “Yes,” he exclaimed, “I am your’s—entirely your’s ! If you want money, any amount of money, remember that I am rich !”

The young painter had no time to answer, for, at that very moment, a loud knock was heard at the library door. De Breulh frowned—“Gontran, let me in quick !” cried a woman’s voice.

“Why, it’s Madame de Bois d’Ardon,” said the baron hastily.

He at once drew back the bolt, and the viscountess, after her usual style, rushed like a whirlwind into the room, and threw herself on to a low chair. Both her cousin and André at once saw that her lovely eyes were full of tears, and that she was excessively agitated. M. de Breulh had reason to feel frightened, for the viscountess was not given to spoiling her complexion by tears, except for some excellent reason. “What’s the trouble ?” he asked, kindly.

“The greatest misfortune in the world,” she sobbed ; “but you may be able to help me—”

“Be sure of my willingness, Clotilde.”

“Can you lend me twenty thousand francs ?”

A load was lifted from her cousin’s heart. He smiled. “If that’s all,” he said, “dry your eyes, my fair cousin.”

“But I must have them this moment—”

“Can you wait half an hour ?”

“Yes, but make haste !”

De Breulh wrote ten lines, and gave them to a lacquey, with directions to go to his banker’s like the wind.

“Thanks !” cried Madame de Bois d’Ardon, “infinite thanks ! But the money isn’t everything ; I want a little advice.”

Supposing the viscountess would like to be alone with her cousin, André rose to retire, but she stopped him with a friendly, gracious gesture. “Remain, Monsieur André,” she said ; “you are not *de trop* ; besides, I wish to speak about a person in whom you take a great interest.”

“About Mademoiselle de Mussidan, perhaps ?”

“Precisely. And now I trust you will be willing to stay !”

The garrulous viscountess had never in all her life remained for five consecutive minutes in the same state of mind. She had come into the room in tears, but she had already dried and forgotten them, and seemed much amused. “Upon my word,” she said, “I never heard of such an extraordinary adventure as I’ve just had, Gontran. You owe my visit to it. Such things never happen to any one but me, I really believe !” This is a fixed belief of Madame de Bois d’Ardon’s. She is persuaded that her life is one long succession of events peculiar to herself.

“I am listening to you, my dear Clotilde,” said her patient cousin.

“And your time will not be thrown away. This afternoon, I was just going up-stairs to dress—it was very late, for I had had at least twenty visitors—but at that very moment another one called, and he was so close on the heels of the footman who announced him, that I couldn’t decently give instructions to say I wasn’t at home. Now, who do you think this person was ? Guess !”

“I can’t imagine !”

"Well, then, it was the Marquis de Croisenois."

"The brother of that Croisenois who disappeared so strangely twenty years ago?"

"Yes—exactly."

"Is he one of your friends?"

"No, indeed; I barely know him. I meet him in society occasionally; but I don't remember ever dancing with him. He bows to me in the Bois, and that's all."

"And yet he calls on you as unceremoniously as that?"

"You are spoiling all my points," exclaimed the countess, with a pretty, threatening gesture. "Yes, he comes 'unceremoniously like that.' As you may know, he's very good-looking, and always well dressed, extremely agreeable, and a witty talker. He came under the best possible auspices; for he brought a letter from an old friend of your grandmother and mine—the Marquise d'Ar lange."

"Not that eccentric person who is the godmother of the young Countess de Commarin?"

"Yes, the very same. But I delight in the old lady. She swears like a trooper, to be sure; and when she tells some of her youthful adventures she is—well, not to put too fine a point upon it—she is *épatante!*"

This last word almost caused André to leap from his chair. He was very innocent. He knew no other woman belonging to the aristocracy except Sabine, and he sometimes thought they all, in some degree, resembled his most perfect model. He was not aware that ladies of fashion—those, too, who were really good and pure—tried their utmost to appear as if they belonged to the *demi monde*, seemingly fancying that they thus proved their cleverness and freedom from prejudice. He did not know that women of rank delighted to indulge in all such little bits of slang as came to their knowledge, or that they were enraptured when anyone mistook them for disreputable characters. Thus he had still a great deal to learn, as will be seen.

However, the viscountess talked on. "In the letter Monsieur de Croisenois brought me," she said, "the Marquise d'Ar lange stated that he was one of her friends, and begged me to grant him, for her sake, the favour he was about to ask."

"Why didn't she come with him?"

"Because she is kept in her bed by rheumatism. Of course I told him to take a chair, and assured him that if I could serve him in any way I would do so. We began to talk on general topics, and he told me a most delightful story about M. de Clinchan and an actress at the Variétés. I was extremely amused, when all at once I heard a dispute in the hall. I rang to ascertain what it meant, when suddenly the door opened, and in came Van Klopen with a very red face."

"Van Klopen?"

"Yes, don't you know him? Van Klopen, the dressmaker. I said to myself, 'He has come here like this because he has just invented something especially *chic*, and wants to submit it to me.' But do you know what the rascal wanted?"

M. de Breulh did not laugh, but there was a twinkle in his eye as he answered, "Perhaps it was money."

This penetration fairly astounded the viscountess, and she remained for a moment without resuming. "You are right," she at last answered gravely. "He brought me his bill into my very drawing-room, and presented it to

me before a stranger. He had forced his way in, in spite of the opposition of my servants. I had never supposed that Van Klopen, who is employed by the very best people, could have been guilty of such a piece of impudence."

"It is most extraordinary," answered her cousin indignantly.

"Well, I ordered him to leave the room, and took it for granted he would obey and apologize. But I was greatly mistaken. The fellow flew into a passion, threatened me, and declared that if I did not pay him at once, he would go to my husband."

M. de Bois d'Ardon was the most generous of men, and allowed his wife a very large sum indeed for her personal requirements, it being an understanding that she should never run into debt. M. de Breulh was aware of this, and so he asked, "Was the bill a heavy one?"

"He had brought it up to nineteen thousand and several hundred francs. Imagine my horror when I saw it. The sum was so enormous that I humbly entreated Van Klopen to be patient, and promised him to call during the day and pay him a certain sum on account. But my evident terror increased his audacity, and he seated himself in an arm-chair and declared he would remain there until I gave him the money, or until he had seen my husband."

"And what did Croisenois do all the time?" cried M. de Breulh, enraged to hear that his cousin had been treated so impudently.

"Nothing, at first; but at this last insolent threat he rose, drew out a pocket-book, and threw it in Van Klopen's face, saying at the same time, 'Pay yourself, scoundrel, and be off with you!'"

"And then the scamp went away—"

"No, indeed. 'I must give you a receipt,' he said, turning to the marquis; and he pulled writing materials out of his pocket, and scrawled at the bottom of the bill, 'Received from Monsieur de Croisenois, on account of Madame la Vicomtesse de Bois d'Ardon, the sum of, etc., etc.'"

"Oh! indeed! really so?" ejaculated M. de Breulh in the most peculiar tone. "Well, I suppose that after Van Klopen had left, M. de Croisenois no longer hesitated to ask you the favour he had come about?"

The viscountess shook her head. "No, you are mistaken. I had the greatest difficulty in making him speak; but at last he acknowledged that he was desperately in love with Mademoiselle de Mussidan; and begged me to present him to her father, and use all my influence on his behalf."

André and M. de Breulh started simultaneously to their feet, as if stung by the same viper. "It is he!" they both exclaimed.

Their movements were so abrupt and threatening that Madame de Bois d'Ardon gave vent to a shrill little cry of terrified surprise. "It is he!" she repeated, looking from one to the other. "What on earth do you mean?"

"That your Marquis de Croisenois is a wretch, who has imposed on Madame d'Arlange."

"Very possibly; but—"

"Listen, Clotilde; listen to our reasons."

And immediately, with extreme vivacity, the baron laid the entire situation before her, showed her poor Sabine's letter, and repeated André's deductions almost word for word. Clotilde must have been deeply interested, for she never once interrupted him. She gave an occasional nod of the head, but that was all. However, when De Breulh had finished, with a wise little air that was very bewitching she said, "Your reasoning is all good, except that you start wrong. Let me have the floor now. You say there's a

mysterious suitor. If he obtains Sabine's hand how will he do so? Through some mysterious power he exercises over the count and the countess—by means of threats, I suppose."

"Of course; that's clear to any one."

"To be sure; but, my dear Gontran, it is clear that this mysterious suitor must have some sort of connection with the family he threatens—utter strangers couldn't exercise compulsory power, you know. Now, M. de Croisenois has never 't his foot inside the Hôtel de Mussidan—he knows Octave so little that he came to ask me to introduce him."

This remark was so specious and peremptory that De Breulh offered no objection. "You are right," he said, under his breath.

But André was not easily diverted from the scent. "I admit," said he, "that at first sight this seems to destroy our theory; but I suspect that matters are not quite as they seem to be; and the more I reflect about the extraordinary scene the viscountess has described, the more my suspicions are confirmed. Allow me to ask a few questions. Didn't Van Klopen's proceedings strike you as very odd?"

"Monstrous, sir; revolting! unheard of!"

"Are you not one of his best customers?"

"Yes; I have spent a fortune in his establishment."

André looked as if this information pleased him.

"But," exclaimed De Breulh, "it isn't so very strange after all on Van Klopen's part. Didn't he bring an action against Madame de Reversay?"

"That may be; but we have yet to learn," said André, "that he pushed his way into her salon, presented his bill before a stranger, and then seated himself and refused to budge."

"And we have yet to learn," urged the viscountess, "that she paid him seventeen thousand francs on account last month, as I did."

"Then his insulting conduct towards you, madame, is all the more inexplicable," said André; and turning towards M. de Breulh he asked, "Do you know M. de Croisenois?"

"Oh! very little. He belongs to an excellent family, I know, and his elder brother George was highly esteemed by everyone."

"Is he rich?"

"I fancy not; but some day he will come into possession of a large fortune. In the meantime, he probably has more debts than income."

"And yet he happened to have twenty thousand francs in his pocket! That's rather a large sum for a man to carry about him when he makes a call; and then, too, it's rather odd that it should happen to be precisely the sum required to pay a dressmaker's bill." André seemed to have greatly changed since he began speaking. The thought of Sabine's danger inspired him with energy and swift perception, and like a magistrate questioning a witness, he spoke imperatively, pursuing his investigation point by point. "Then, too, there's another strange thing," said he. "Madame de Bois d'Ardon has told us that Van Klopen received the pocket-book full in his face. Did he say nothing?"

"Not a word."

"He accepted the insult without a wink? He didn't even ask this stranger why he meddled in the matter?"

"I didn't think of it at the time; but it was certainly very odd—"

"One moment, if you please. Did Van Klopen open the pocket-book and count the notes before he wrote the receipt?"

Madame de Bois d'Ardon frowned, and seemed to make an urgent appeal

to her memory. "I'm not certain," she said hesitatingly. "You know that I was naturally much disturbed and troubled; but I feel almost sure that I never saw the notes in Van Kloopen's hands."

André's face was radiant. "Better and better!" he exclaimed. "He was told to pay himself; but he didn't even look to see how much was in the pocket-book. He simply pocketed it, and gave a receipt. Let us also note the fact that M. de Croisenois had apparently neither card nor letter in this pocket-book; nothing, in fact, but the sum of twenty thousand francs, which was precisely what was needed."

"It doesn't seem altogether natural," murmured De Breulh.

"Wait a bit," said André, hastily. "Your bill, madame, was not twenty thousand francs precisely?"

"No," answered the viscountess. "Van Kloopen ought to have returned some change, a hundred and thirty or a hundred and fifty francs—something like that."

"And he didn't?"

"No; but then he was so much excited."

"Do you think so, madame? And yet he recollects he had writing materials in his pocket, and remembered to give a receipt."

The viscountess was dumbfounded. It seemed to her that a thick fog had been before her eyes, and was now clearing away.

"Then," continued André, "Van Kloopen wrote the receipt, but how did he know De Croisenois's name? How did he know who he was, unless he had seen him before? And now, one more question: What has become of this receipt—"

He stopped short, for Madame de Bois d'Ardon had turned very pale, and was perceptibly trembling. "Ah!" she said, "I felt all the time that some terrible misfortune was about to overtake me. It was on this very point that I wanted to speak to you, Gontran, and ask your advice."

"Go on, Clotilde."

"Well, you see, I haven't got this bill. M. de Croisenois crushed it in his hand and threw it down on the table; but afterwards he picked it up mechanically, and put it in his pocket."

André was triumphant now. "The game's clear," he said. "M. de Croisenois needed your influence, madame, and was determined to put a refusal out of your power. Now, even supposing you took no interest in him, wouldn't you feel you owed him, well, to use a vulgar phrase, 'a good turn,' on account of these twenty thousand francs so generously lent you by him at a moment of great necessity?"

"Yes, you are right!"

Many times in her life had the amiable viscountess risked her name, her reputation, her happiness and her husband's, for some mere fancy—or through sheer indolence. She had had many a fright, but never such a terrible one as this. "Good heavens!" she cried, "why do you alarm me in this way? It isn't generous. What do you suppose M. de Croisenois could possibly do with this receipt?"

What could he do with it? She knew only too well, and yet with that moral weakness, which is as inconceivable as it is common, she refused to look the danger in the face, or even to admit that there was any danger at all. "He will do nothing," said her cousin, "nothing, if you warmly espouse his cause; but, just hesitate for a moment, and he'll show you that you have no choice in the matter: that you must be his ally for he holds your honour in his hands."

"And, unfortunately," added André, "a woman's reputation has always been, and always will be, at the mercy of a fool, or a knave!"

"No! no!" exclaimed the viscountess, as distressed as a child who has just been frightened by its nurse with some frightful hobgoblin tale. "You are exaggerating—you are surely deceiving yourselves."

"What?" answered her cousin, sadly. "You are well aware that in these days of extravagant toilettes, there are women of fashion, who ruin their lovers quite as adroitly as a class of creatures I don't care to speak about. To-morrow, at his club, De Croisenois may say: 'That little Bois d'Ardon costs me a mint of money!' And then, perhaps, he'll show your bill of twenty thousand francs receipted in his name. What will be the conclusion, then?"

"People will do me the honour to believe—"

"No, people will do you no honour whatever, Clotilde. Come, now, who on earth would believe it to be a loan? Folks will simply say: 'That little viscountess is a terrible coquette. The money her husband gives her isn't enough, and so she's eating up poor Croisenois.' And every man in the club will laugh knowingly. You know that, you know such things occur every day. And a little later, mind, the story will reach your husband's ears, considerably enlivened and embellished."

The poor viscountess wrung her hands in despair. "It's terrible!" she sobbed. "And do you know, Bois d'Ardon would really believe the worst. He declares that a woman like myself, who sets the fashion in the matter of toilettes, is capable of anything to maintain her pre-eminence and drive other women to despair. Yes, he has often said it." De Breulh's and André's silence told Clotilde that they agreed with her husband. "This mania for dress has been my ruin," she added. "I ought to be the happiest of women, and should be but for that. Never! no, never will I have another bill anywhere again!"

Madame de Bois d'Ardon habitually took this same heroic resolution each time a heavy invoice reached her, but the oaths of a woman of fashion and those of a drunkard are surprisingly alike, and thus the viscountess speedily relapsed into her old ways. "Now, tell me, Gontran," said she, "what I had best do? You will help me, I'm sure. Can't you ask De Croisenois for that wretched bill?"

M de Breulh hesitated. "I can, of course, but such a step would rather do you harm than good. I have no decisive proofs against him, you know. And if he's the man I believe, he will deny everything. For me to go to him, would be to show him you have divined his intentions, and would make an enemy of him for life."

"And, besides," added André, "you would put the man on his guard, and he would escape us."

The unfortunate viscountess looked from the one to the other in despair. "Am I utterly lost, then?" she cried, amid her tears; "am I to remain all my life in the power of this odious being, condemned to obey him like a slave?"

André came to the rescue. "No, madame," he answered, "reassure yourself. I shall be able ere long, I think, to reduce M. de Croisenois to such a position that, instead of ordering and threatening, he will have to obey. However, one more question. What did you say when he asked you to introduce him to the Mussidans?"

"Nothing positive, for I thought of you and Sabine."

"Then, madame, sleep in peace to-night. As long as he hopes for your

assistance, he will take care not to annoy you. So serve his interests, introduce him to M. de Mussidan, and sing his praises."

"But you, sir?"

"I, madame, aided by M. de Breulh, will toil to unmask this scoundrel. And the more secure he believes himself to be, the easier our task."

He was here interrupted by the arrival of the servant who had been sent by De Breulh to the bank. When the lacquey had left the room, his master took the notes and placed them in his cousin's hands. "Here, my dear Clotilde, is the money for De Croisenois. Take my advice and send it to him this evening with a gracious note."

"Thanks, Gontran. I will do precisely as you say."

"And don't fail to slip into your letter a word of hope in reference to the introduction. What do you say, André?"

But André was buried in thought. "I think," he answered finally, "that if a receipt could be obtained for this sum from Croisenois it would be something gained."

"Are you jesting?"

"By no means."

"But the mere request would awaken the rascal's suspicions."

"Possibly," answered the painter. "And yet—" He turned hastily towards the viscountess. "Do you happen to have a maid you can rely on, madame?" he asked.

"Yes, I have one as true as gold and as sharp as steel."

"Very well. Then give that girl the letter and the package of bank notes separately. Drill her thoroughly. When she sees De Croisenois let her pretend to be terrified at the large amount of money she has been trusted with. Tell her to make a great fuss, and to insist on having a receipt to relieve her of all responsibility."

"That sounds feasible, certainly," said De Breulh.

"And she will do it," exclaimed the viscountess, eagerly. "Josephine hasn't her equal for playing such a farce."

And at the idea of a little trickery, a smile spread over Madame de Bois d'Ardon's face. Her anxiety was gone; she felt that under the protection of these two men she need fear no danger. "Trust to me, to keep Croisenois in a good humour," she said. "In a fortnight's time I will be his confidante, and you shall know all he tells me." She clinched her pretty little fist with a threatening gesture, and resumed: "After all, it's fair enough. Why did he come near me? As for Van Klopen, what on earth I am to do without him, Heaven only knows. Where am I to turn? There isn't another man in Paris who can dress me with such *chic!*" And so saying, she rose to leave. "I'm tired out," she added; "four friends of my husband's dine with us to-day. So I must be off. Adieu, or rather, *au revoir.*" Then light-hearted and smiling as usual she hurried to her carriage.

"And such are the women of nowadays," sighed M. de Breulh; "and whenever you come across one with a vestige of a heart, she's utterly without brains."

But André was too much engrossed with his fixed idea to reply to this observation. "Now," he exclaimed, "Croisenois belongs to us. We have our starting point. He holds M. de Mussidan no doubt much as he fancies he holds your cousin. We know this honourable gentleman's ways of working. He robs you of your secrets, and blackmails you afterwards. But we are ahead of him. He shall make nothing out of M. de Mussidan."

XXV.

It is by no means agreeable for a selfish bachelor to be suddenly dispossessed of a cosy home, in which he has surrounded himself with all kinds of celibatarian luxuries and comforts. In fact, anything more disagreeable can scarcely be imagined; and yet this was what Dr. Hortebize had now to submit to, in consequence of Mascarot's request (presented by worthy Father Tantaine) that he would kindly give hospitality to young Paul Violaine. The amiable epicurean turned pale and shuddered at the mere thought of this intrusion. To share his rooms, or have them invaded by a *huissier* seemed to him much about the same thing. His life was to be disorganized, his habits hampered, and his liberty compromised. What could he do, where could he go, what pleasure could he allow himself, with this youth as his guest perforse, sleeping under his roof, eating at his table, following him everywhere, hanging in fact to his coat tails like a child hangs to its nurse's apron? No more delightful restaurant dinners in the society of appreciative companions—no more of those mysterious feminine visitors he received in the evening with curtains closely drawn, after all his servants had been sent to the theatre. Thus in his heart he devoutly wished that the earth would open and swallow up both the honourable Mascarot and his *protégé*.

Still the idea of evading the instructions he had received never entered his mind. Knowing the agent's designs, he realized that it was of capital importance to watch Paul during the first few days. The lad must be polished, dazzled and so transformed as to create a perfect chasm between his past and his future. And, moreover, it was indispensable that he should in some measure be prepared to hear the truth. His conscience must be hardened, so as to resist all qualms. Accordingly the doctor resigned himself to the task before him.

Paul found him a most agreeable companion, clever and witty, with an inexhaustible fund of anecdotes; a facile counsellor, moreover, preaching but a mild morality, and unscrupulous philosophy. For five days they remained together, breakfasting at the best restaurants, driving in the Bois, and dining at the doctor's club. The evenings were regularly spent at M. Martin Rigal's, the doctor playing cards with the banker, while Paul and Flavia talked apart in low voices, or indulged in music.

But nothing is eternal here below. Paul had only led this existence for five days, when Tantaine suddenly called and announced he had come to fetch him and his luggage. "I've arranged the most charming little retreat in the world for you," said he, "of course, it isn't as fine as here, but it's in keeping with your position."

"Where is it?"

Tantaine smiled knowingly. "Having an eye to the preservation of your shoe-leather," he answered, "I've secured rooms for you very near M. Martin Rigal's."

The old man was without his equal in such matters. He knew everything and everybody, and foresaw all emergencies and contingencies. Paul realized this at his first glance round his new home. It was in the Rue Montmartre, almost at the corner of the Rue Joquelet, that Tantaine had found these rooms, modest ones, such as an artist who had overcome the first difficulties of life, and saw a future opening before him, would feel

justified in occupying. The apartment, situated on the third floor, comprised a small vestibule, a dressing-room, and two chambers—one for sleeping in, the other for work, both tastefully arranged, the latter having a piano near the window. Everything was neat and clean—furniture, hangings and ornaments, but nothing was new, and Paul was struck by the fact that this apartment, rented and furnished for him only three days previously, seemed to have been long inhabited. Furniture is of course not animated, except by spirit rappers, and yet all those goods and chattels, the very rooms themselves, seemed palpitating with life. You might have sworn that the tenant had merely gone out for a lounge, and would soon be home again. The bed looked as if it were still warm, and two half burned candles added to the general impression. Beside the bed were a pair of slippers that had already been worn. The fire was not quite out, and on the mantelshelf was a cigar stump ; a sheet of music paper with a few bars written down, lying on the table in the work room. Paul so fancied himself in another person's abode that he at once exclaimed :—" But sir, this apartment is inhabited already— "

"We are in your home, my dear boy."

"Then you bought everything as it stood, and the owner simply walked out."

Tantaine seemed as delighted as a school-boy who has played some practical joke. "For a whole year," said he, "you have been the sole tenant of this apartment. Don't you know your own home ?"

Paul listened with his mouth wide open, as if confronting some mystery. "I don't understand you," he said, finally. "You are jesting, I presume."

"I was never more in earnest. You have lived here for more than a year. Do you want proof of what I say ?" So saying, he ran to the top of the stairs without waiting for a reply, and shouted out : "Mother Bregot ! Come up stairs, please." Then turning to Paul, he added : "The concierge will be here immediately."

A moment later, an elderly woman, repulsively obese, with a very red nose, and an obsequious air, belied by the expression of her eyes, twinkling under heavy grey brows, came panting and puffing into the room. "Good-morning, Mother Bregot," said Tantaine gaily. "I wanted to speak to you a moment."

"All right, sir."

Tantaine pointed to Paul. "You know this gentleman, I suppose ?"

"What a question—do I know one of our tenants ?"

"What's his name ?"

"Paul."

"Nothing more ?"

"Well sir, he's generally called Paul, and nothing else. It isn't his fault if he never knew his father or mother."

"What's his profession ?"

"He's an artist. He gives lessons on the piano, composes and copies music."

"What does he make in this way ?"

"You ask me too much, sir, but I should say that it ought to be three or four hundred francs a month."

"And that's enough for him ?"

"Oh, yes ; but then he's so economical and sensible, and well-behaved ! A regular girl—at least, if I had a girl, I should like her to resemble him. He works hard, and is always neat and well dressed." She drew out her

snuff-box, took a copious pinch, and then in a tone of profound conviction, added : "He's handsome too."

Tantaine's face beamed good-naturedly. "You seem to have known M. Paul a long time, as you are so well acquainted with his affairs."

"I should think I ought to know something about him and his business, since he has lived here for nearly fifteen months, and I've attended to his rooms all the time."

"Do you know where he lived before he came here ?"

"Of course I do, for I went to find out about him. He lived in the Rue Jacob, on the other side of the Seine. The people over there were sorry to have him leave, too, but he wanted to be nearer his work at the public library in the Rue Richelieu."

Tantaine lifted his finger. "That'll do, Mother Bregot," said he, "now leave me alone with this gentleman."

Paul had listened to these extraordinary questions and answers with the air of a man who is uncertain whether he is asleep or awake. Tantaine stood near the open door until the concierge was down stairs again ; then he closed it carefully, and, with a hearty laugh, returned to Mascarot's *protégé*. "What do you say to that?"

It took Paul a minute or two to regain the power of speech. He struggled to collect his ideas. He remembered what Dr. Hortebize had said to him fully a dozen times within the last five days. "Don't be astonished at anything, but expect the most extraordinary events. Be prepared." Thus mindful the young fellow wonderfully retained his self-possession under this first attack. "I suppose," he said finally, "that you told this woman what to say."

Old Tantaine shrugged his shoulders in evident despair and disappointment. "Merciful heavens ! " said he, with withering contempt which he took no pains to conceal. "If that's all you understand from the scene you've just witnessed we are far enough from the point we wish to reach."

This tone piqued the restless vanity of Mascarot's *protégé*. "I beg your pardon," he rejoined sulkily, "I understand that this scene is a preface to some romance."

These words delighted Tantaine's very soul. "Yes, my lad," he cried, enthusiastically, "yes ; but it's also an indispensable preface. The romance will be revealed to you at the proper moment, and you will understand what success awaits you if you only play your part with skill."

"Why not tell me now ?"

Tantaine shook his head. "Patience ! " he said, "patience ! impetuous youth, Paris was not built in a day. Let yourself be guided—yield without fear to your protectors, let us strengthen you for the burden. To-day you've received your first lesson. Now think it over."

"My first lesson ?"

"Call it a rehearsal, my lad, if you choose. I preferred to put what I had to tell you into another person's mouth, or rather into action, as it were, thus hoping to engrave it more deeply on your mind and memory. Everything that good woman said, must be looked upon by you as true. *It is true*. When you have so persuaded yourself you will be ready for the battle. Till then you must rest on your arms. Remember this, no one impresses another with a truth he himself doubts of. There has never been a single impostor of any celebrity who wasn't his own first dupe."

At this word "impostor," Mascarot's *protégé* started and tried to protest, but with a wave of the hand Tantaine enjoined silence. "One of my

friends," he said, "lived on terms of great intimacy with a false Louis XVII., and he related to me a quantity of the particulars of this spurious prince's life. This young fellow, who was the son of a shoemaker at Amiens, was so successful in assuming the personality of the young king, that, accidentally meeting a girl of his town, whom he had once dearly loved, he actually didn't recognise her."

"Oh ! that's not possible !" interrupted Paul.

"I tell you *he didn't recognise her*. Now see what perfection *you* can attain in this line. Don't smile, the matter is serious enough, I assure you. You must, as it were, cast your own skin aside, and slip into another man's. Paul Violaine—the illegitimate son of a woman who kept a thread-and-needle shop at Poitiers—Rose's artless lover—no longer exists. He died of starvation in a garret at the Hôtel de Pérou as Madame Loupias will prove when needed."

Tantaine was in earnest, as it was plain to see. He had cast aside his mask of jesting joviality, and it was in brief, decided words that he drove his ideas into his listener's torpid brain. "You must get rid of your old self as you would get rid of an old coat, which a man tosses aside and forgets. You must get rid of all recollection, and entirely so, so that if any one called out 'Eh, Violaine?' in the street, you would never dream of turning round."

Although Paul had been warned to prepare himself for this lesson, he felt his reason flicker, so to say, like a candle in a draught. "Well, who am I, then ?" he stammered.

Tantaine smiled sardonically. "The concierge told you. You are Paul —Paul nothing. You were brought up at the Enfants-Trouvés, and never knew your parents. You have lived here for fifteen months, and previously you resided in the Rue Jacob. Your concierge knows no more. But you shall go with me to the Rue Jacob. The concierge there will know you, and tell you where you lived before. Perhaps, after a time, if we are diligent and watchful, we may be able to trace you back to your childhood, and even find a father for you !"

Paul looked up quickly. "But suppose I am questioned about my past life?" he asked. "That might easily happen, you know. Suppose M. Martin Rigal or Mademoiselle Flavia questioned me ?"

"Ah, ha ! Now I understand. Don't be concerned, however. You shall be provided with documents so explicit and precise, that if they require it you will be able to give them the history of every hour, so to speak, of the three and twenty years you have lived in this world."

"Then, I presume the person whose place I take was a musician and composer like myself."

Tantaine by this time was utterly out of patience, and he swore a mighty oath. "Are you playing the simpleton," he asked, "or are you speaking in good faith ? Now have I told you that you have taken any one's place ? Why do you talk in this way ? No one but you has ever lived here. Didn't you hear the concierge ?"

"Yes ; but—"

"Heavens and earth ? She told you you were an artist. You are a self-made man ; and while waiting until your abilities as a composer are duly recognised, you give lessons."

"Lessons ? But lessons to whom ?"

Tantaine turned to a bowl on the mantelshelf, and took out three visiting cards. "Here are the names and addresses of three pupils of yours,

who will each give you a hundred francs a month for two lessons weekly. Two of them will assure you, if you doubt it, that you have been their teacher for a long time. The third, Madame Grandorge, a widow, will swear that she owes everything she knows of music, which is no little, to your lessons. To-morrow you will call on these pupils at the hour noted on their cards. You will be received as if you were an habitué of the house, and you will try to be as much at ease as if that were really the case."

"I will endeavour to obey you."

"One word more. In addition to your lessons, and so as to increase your earnings, you copy fragments of old unpublished operas for wealthy amateurs, at the National Library. On the piano lies the work you are now doing for the Marquis de Croisenois—a charming work by Valserra, '*I tredici mesi*.'

Tantaine now took Paul's arm, and made him visit the rooms in detail.

"You see," said he, "nothing has been forgotten—any one would have supposed you had lived here a century. Like a young man who has always led a regular life, you have, of course, some little savings, which you will find in the drawer of the writing-table—eight shares in the Orleans Railway line, and a thousand francs or so in cash."

Questions innumerable surged to Paul's lips, but his companion was already on the threshold, and only delayed to say: "I will come back to-morrow with the doctor." Then wishing his pupil a sarcastically deferential good-bye, he added, as Mascarot had done: "You will be a duke yet."

The concierge, Mother Bregot, was lying in wait for Tantaine, and as soon as she saw him coming down stairs, with his head bowed as if he were in serious thought, she hastened towards him as quickly as her bulk would allow of. "How did I do it, Father Tantaine?" she asked.

"Hush!" he answered, roughly pushing her into her room, the door of which stood open. "Hush! Are you mad to talk like that out here at the risk of being overheard by the first chance comer?"

He seemed so angry that the concierge almost trembled. "I hope," she stammered, "that I pleased you by my replies."

"You did it very well, Mother Bregot, very well. You grasped the idea perfectly. I shall have a good report to make of you to M. Mascarot."

"I am glad of that! So now Bregot and I are safe."

The old man shook his head doubtfully. "Safe!" he answered. "Well, I don't know about that yet. The master has a long arm, to be sure, but you have enemies—many enemies. All the servants in the house execrate you, and they would be only too pleased—I'm sure of that—if you were to meet with trouble."

"Oh, really? I don't understand it; for we, both my husband and myself, have been very good to them all."

"You are good to them just now, no doubt, for you wish to have them on your side; but you know it was very different formerly. You were very foolish, you and your husband both. The law admits of no evasion—Article 386, paragraph 3, means a long term of solitary confinement—and your weak point is, you were seen with the bunch of keys in your hands, by the two women on the second floor."

The portly concierge turned very pale, clasped her hands and said, in entreating tones: "Speak lower, sir—I beg you—lower!"

"The great mistake you made was in not coming to consult my master earlier. There had already been considerable gossip, and the police had got an inkling of the affair."

"Yes, but if M. Mascarot pleased—"

"He does please, my good woman, and really desires to serve you. I'm quite sure he will succeed in suppressing the inquiry, or if it must proceed after all, he will at least secure several witnesses in your favour. Only, you know, he expects service for service, and he must be implicitly obeyed."

"The dear, good man! We would pass through fire and water for him, Bregot and I, while my daughter Euphémie, would do anything in the world for him."

The old man started back, for the woman, in her enthusiastic gratitude, looked as if she was about to throw herself on his neck. "The master doesn't care much about this fire and water business," said he, "he only asks you never to vary a hair's breadth in your statements about Paul. He expects absolute discretion. If you ever breathe one word of the great secret confided to you, he will give you up to justice, and then, as I told you, Article 386—"

It was evident that each allusion to this clause in the Code, which enunciates the penalties inflicted on servants who rob their employers, quite terrified the old woman. "If my head were under the axe," she declared, "I would repeat to the last gasp that M. Paul had been my lodger for over a year, that he's an artist, and all the rest of it. As to breathing one word of all you tell me, I'd sooner cut my tongue out. Now do you believe me!"

Her tone was so earnest and sincere that Tantaine recovered his usual equanimity. "Keep to your word," he said, "and on that condition I'm authorised to bid you hope. Yes, the day our young man's affairs are settled, you will receive from me a little paper, which will make you as white as snow, and enable you to tell every one you've been infamously slandered."

This was an absolute bargain, and Mother Bregot must have so understood it. "May the dear fellow succeed quickly!" she said.

"It won't be very long, I assure you. But don't forget that in the meantime you mustn't take your eyes off him for a moment—"

"Oh, depend on me, I won't forget."

"And no matter who calls, I am to know it at once—boy or woman, man or servant. Nothing is too trivial for you to report to me."

"No one can get up stairs without my seeing and hearing them."

"And if any one calls, except the master, Dr. Hortebize, and I, you must come and report it at the office immediately."

"Never fear, I'll let you know it in five minutes."

Tantaine reflected for a moment. "I wonder if this is all I had to say? Ah! I remember. Note the hours this young fellow keeps. Talk to him as little as possible, but watch him attentively, whenever you are doing his rooms, whenever he goes out or comes home." With these words Tantaine turned to leave, paying but little heed to Mother Bregot's zealous protestations. "Watch! watch!" were his last words. "Above all, don't let him make a fool of himself."

This last caution was for the time being unnecessary. Paul had no thought of doing anything whatever. Whilst he was under Tantaine's eyes he had from vanity pretended to be unmoved by the strange position in which he found himself; but as soon as he was alone, he sank into a chair in a state of absolute terror and bewilderment. When a man disguises himself, assumes a false name and costume, he usually does so for a brief

interval ; he knows that he will sooner or later become himself again. But Paul was called upon to discard his personality for ever. He would perhaps become wealthy, marry Flavia, sport a title and a noble name ; but wealth, wife, and dignities, would all be the outcome of a scandalous piece of deception. Never, no never, could he become "himself" again. He would be like an actor, like a masquerader, compelled to wear his mask and hired costume till the day of his death. His death indeed ! He remembered with a shudder that old Taine had said, "Paul Violaine is dead ;" and in fact it seemed as if he were bereft of something already. Had any one, before, ever been circumstanced as he was ? Ay, yes, he remembered now a celebrated case, which he had read about—the case of Cognard, the bold bandit, who assumed the style and title of Comte de Saint-Hélène, and whose martial air was admired by all Paris when he figured at the royal reviews. Cognard had shaken off the past, and become a nobleman, honoured and respected. So artfully had his scheme been combined, that he had fancied himself secure from detection. But what happened ? Why, he was denounced by an old companion of the ball and chain, a comrade who had known him at the *bagné* of Brest. The *bagné*—the galleys—incarceration for life ! Paul must risk all this in the dangerous game he was called upon to play. Might he not be recognised by some forgotten comrade or acquaintance, who, in the moment of triumph, would scornfully point at him, and exclaim : "He a nobleman—a duke ? Why, his name's Paul Violaine, and his mother kept a petty thread-and-needle shop, in the Rue des Vignes at Poitiers ! "

What would he do then ? Would he have the requisite courage and self-possession to turn laughingly towards his accuser, and cheerfully say : "Look at me again, my friend, and see if you are not mistaken ! for I never saw you before."

Paul felt that he was incapable of such audacious impudence, and the conviction of not being equal to the task increased his fright. If he had not been already engaged and compromised, if he had known what to do, where to go and how to live, he would no doubt have taken to flight. But could he possibly venture on such a course ? Albeit, inexperienced, he realised that men like Mascarot, Hortebeize, and Taine, did not willingly confide their secrets to the winds. The revelations they had made to him conclusively showed that they considered him to be altogether in their power. Paul had a clear perception of what being in Mascarot's power signified. He felt certain that if he were to try and abscond he would never succeed in escaping the agent's vengeance. No doubt compliance with Mascarot's designs implied great risk and danger, but danger far ahead and altogether uncertain. On the other hand, refusal signified immediate peril, of a nature perfectly defined. Placed between these alternatives, Paul, not unnaturally, chose that in which the day of reckoning seemed farthest off, and conquering the last qualms of conscience, said to himself : "I accept ; and now, forward to the bitter end."

It must here be acknowledged, that Paul's decision was greatly influenced by all he had seen and heard during his five days' intimacy with Dr. Hortebeize. The worthy doctor was expert in rendering vice attractive, and smothering conscientious scruples. In exposing his odious theories he employed the most charming and graceful language, and if his hearer looked shocked or even surprised, he had always innumerable examples to quote. It was, therefore, almost impossible for a youth, whose principles were by no means fixed, and who hankered after luxury, and all that wealth can

give, to resist his specious arguments. Even a stronger minded fellow than Paul would have probably succumbed to the physician's incessant and insidious attacks, which, insignificant as they seemed at first sight, finished by destroying all honesty of mind, just as dripping water ends by wearing away even a mighty rock. Dr. Hortebize held that the world was divided into two classes. "And which do you mean to belong to," he asked Paul, "to Abel's posterity, or Cain's? There's no middle course. The sons of Abel are like sheep in the hands of the shearer. Cain's posterity, on the contrary, hold the scissors and clip the wool. What do you fear? The Divinity doesn't come down among the clouds, nowadays, and ask, 'What hast thou done with thy brother?' We have only to deal with human justice, which merely inquires if Abel has been sheared or done away with without transgressing the laws. Success, remember, justifies everything. A good big crime, which at one stroke makes a man wealthy, spares him the commission of an infinity of little sins which so called respectable people are guilty of. The high road to Fortune is so crowded, so blocked up, that the only fellows who reach their destination are those who contrive to take a short cut."

Such were the doctor's doctrines; and terrible to say, he could enforce them by speaking of himself and his own prosperity, in virtue of the axiom that example teaches more than precept. He seemed in fact, a living proof that justice was merely a myth. He personified triumphant vice, vice seated at a perpetual banquet, riding in a stylish carriage and splashing honest pedestrians with mud. As for retributive punishment, which always comes sooner or later, he feared it no doubt in his inner self, but he rightly refrained from troubling Paul with forebodings. He never told him that the medallion dangling from his watch chain contained a swift and subtle poison for use in the event of some sudden catastrophe occurring. No, he simply repeated again and again: "You must be brave, Paul; you must rely entirely on Mascarot, just as I have done, together with the Marquis de Croisenois, Van Klopen, and any number of others. Mascarot can do anything he pleases. He's a sure, devoted friend. Whenever there's a quagmire or a slough of despond between one of his *protégés* and fortune, he never hesitates, but like a modern St. Christopher as he is, he takes his friend on his shoulders and carries him safely across."

On this text the doctor preached endless sermons. But Paul was already a convert. Indeed, far from doubting Mascarot's power, he was rather inclined to over-rate it, so extraordinary did he consider the events which had befallen him since leaving the Hôtel du Pérou. Now, moreover, his installation in this apartment in the Rue Montmartre, appeared to him little short of a prodigy. He was thunderstruck to find that Mascarot ruled so many people, compelling them to serve him in the accomplishment of his projects. This Mother Bregot, who unhesitatingly declared she knew him—the concierge in the Rue Jacob, to whom any one who pleased might refer—the pupils who were ready to declare he had been their master for months, were each and all so many of Mascarot's slaves, compelled to do his bidding, in virtue of some secret of theirs he knew of. "Why need I fear, after all?" Paul asked himself. "Is defeat possible with all these elements of success? Do I risk anything under the protection of a man whom nothing escapes, who seems to have the wonderful power of arranging everything as he pleases, who calculates everything so carefully, leaving nothing whatever to chance? Ought I to hesitate or be over scrupulous? No, no, it would be too foolish, indeed."

However, despite what he said, Paul by no means had a good night's sleep. He woke up several times with a start, fancying that the phantom of the man he would have to personate was hovering round his bed. Still on the following morning, when it was time for him to start off and give his first lesson, he felt his courage, or rather his bounce and impudence, return to him ; and he strode along the streets with head erect, and a self satisfied air, towards the address of Madame Grandorge, the widow who claimed to be the eldest of his pupils. He certainly never dreamt that two of his protectors were concealed behind a heavy dray, attentively watching him, and yet such was the case. Impelled by the same desire to know how Paul conducted himself in his new position, worthy old Tantaine and Dr. Hortebize met at the corner of the Rue Joquelet just in time to see their pupil pass, and on noticing that he was gay and smiling they exchanged a glance of triumph. "Ah ! ha !" chuckled Tantaine, "our young cock crows again this morning ! Last night he seemed to have lost his voice. But he's all right now."

"Yes," said the doctor, approvingly. "He's well started, and I don't think we shall have any trouble with him." However, to make sure, they concluded it would be advisable to call on Mother Bregot, who received them with abject humility. "No one has been near our young gentleman," she said, in answer to Father Tantaine's questions. "Yesterday he came down-stairs after seven, and asked me where the nearest restaurant was. I sent him to Duval's close by. He was back here when the clock struck eight. He went up to his room, and before eleven his lights were out."

"And to-day ?"

"Well, to-day when I went up-stairs, at nine o'clock, he had just finished dressing. After I had arranged the rooms, he told me to get him some breakfast and make some coffee. I obeyed, and he ate with such a good appetite that I said to myself, 'So the bird's getting accustomed to his cage.'"

"And then ?"

"He began to sing like a bird. He sat down at the pianoforte. Ah, the darling ! his voice is as sweet as his face ! I really believe any woman would make a fool of herself for him. I'm only too glad my daughter Euphémie is nowhere about here just now." And the old woman opened her snuff-box and took an enormous pinch.

"He went out after that, did he ?" resumed Tantaine. "Did he say how long he should be gone ?"

"Yes ; time enough to give his lesson. I suppose he knew that you would be here."

"Good." And satisfied with this result of his inquiries, the worthy man turned toward Dr. Hortebize. "Perhaps you were going to the agency, sir," he said.

"Yes ; I must see M. Mascarot."

"He isn't there ; but if you wish to speak to him on business, you had better go up to our young friend's rooms, and wait there with me till he comes ; for I fancy he'll be here this morning. And I wish to see Paul, as well."

"All right," answered the doctor. "Let's go up, then."

Tantaine's suggestion was equivalent to an order for Mother Bregot, who at once produced the key Paul had left with her. The two visitors then climbed the stairs.

Dr. Hortebize was better able than Paul to appreciate the skill which had been exercised in arranging the apartment so that it might appear to

have been long tenanted by its present occupant, and so that the latter's life might seem to be one of work and quiet. "Upon my life ! old man," cried the physician, in a tone of sincere admiration, "what a scene-painter you would make—or rather, how well you would set a play on the stage." At one comprehensive glance he had taken in each detail and accessory, and he continued : "Upon my honour, the mere sight of this workroom or studio would induce any father to give his daughter to the young man who lived in it." He turned, surprised by Tantaine's silence, and then, noticing that the old clerk looked very gloomy, he anxiously asked, "What's the matter ? What troubles you ?"

Tantaine did not answer at first. Sitting with his legs crossed in front of the fire, he remained frantically poking it, as if, indeed, he was anxious to put it out. "I see trouble before us," he said at last in a grumbling tone.

At this declaration the doctor's face darkened. "Is Perpignan meddling?" he hastily asked. "Have you found any insurmountable difficulty in that direction ?"

"No ; Perpignan's a fool—an absolute, intolerable fool. However, he will do precisely what I bid him to do."

Dr. Hortebize smiled again. "Then," he murmured, with a sigh of satisfaction and relief, "I really don't see—"

"Don't see !" interrupted Tantaine severely. "I daresay you don't ; but, unfortunately—or fortunately, rather—I'm not so blind. Have you forgotten Croisenois' marriage ? The obstacle lies in that direction. The whole affair had gone so smoothly—it was so well arranged—and the possibility of any misfortune seemed to have been carefully guarded against ! Yesterday I would have answered with my head for success—but now !"

"Well, you were too certain, that's all ; you were not prepared for the least check."

"That isn't it ; but I must admit that I hadn't foreseen the impossible. There are limits to human intelligence after all, I presume."

"Please explain yourself."

"Well, this is the situation. The most skilful enemy in the world, doctor, could never have purposely blocked our road with the obstacles that chance has thrown in our way. You go a great deal into society, I know, and no doubt you can tell me if, in this year of grace, 1868, you are acquainted with an heiress of high birth and great beauty who cares nothing for luxury, who hasn't a spark of vanity in her nature, but who, on the contrary, is capable of really and truly loving. Come, doctor, have you ever come across such a girl ?"

The doctor answered with a smile that implied negation.

"Nevertheless," continued Tantaine, "such an heiress exists, and her name is Sabine de Mussidan. She loves—whom do think ? A painter, an artist, a man who has crossed my path three times already, and who, I'll swear to it, possesses an immense amount of energy and perseverance."

"Pshaw ! no doubt he's some artist without fortune, position, or friends."

"He's not without friends, unfortunately," answered worthy Tantaine. "At least, he has one friend, and what a friend, too ! Why, none other than the man who was to have married Mademoiselle Sabine—M. de Breulh-Faverlay !" This news was so strange and so utterly unexpected, that Hortebize stood aghast and silent. "How they came together is quite beyond my knowledge," continued Tantaine. "It must have been by some stroke of genius on Mademoiselle Sabine's part ; however, the fact

is there—that they are friends. And, singularly enough, the very woman I selected to further De Croisenois' interests has been chosen by them to push theirs."

"Impossible!"

"That was my opinion also. But none the less, the three were closeted together yesterday evening, and I believe they swore to prevent the marquis from succeeding."

The doctor bounded from his chair. "What do you mean!" he asked, feverishly. "Do you think they have already discovered De Croisenois' plans? How can they have done that?"

Father Taine looked discouraged. "Ah!" said he, "that's the question. A general, you know, can't be in every point of the battle-field at the same time, and among his lieutenants, a certain percentage of fools or traitors is always to be found. Now, I had planned with Van Klopen and Croisenois a little comedy which was to have placed the Viscountess de Bois d'Ardon at our disposal. Everything had been foreseen, combined, and arranged. I had preconcerted each detail with the minutest possible care, and felt absolutely sure of success. Unfortunately, however, after an excellent rehearsal, the real performance was simply disgusting. Neither Van Klopen nor Croisenois took the trouble to play their parts properly. I had prepared for them a little *chef d'œuvre* of finessing, insisting on the various needful transitions of tone and manner; but what did they make of it? Why, a brutal, riotous, ridiculous farce. They thought, the fools, that a woman could be easily deceived. They neglected a number of highly essential particulars; and, to make the mess perfect, the marquis, whom I had told to be most reserved, immediately unmasked his batteries. Yes, the simpleton actually talked to Madame de Bois d'Ardon about Sabine! That lost us the game altogether. The viscountess, momentarily deceived, began to reflect, realised that Van Klopen and Croisenois had been playing into each other's hands, scented something wrong, and rushed off to ask M. de Breulh for help!"

The doctor was in consternation. "Who on earth told you all this?" he gasped.

"No one—I guessed it. Not so difficult a matter, either; given the results, it is easy to go back to the causes. Yes, that is just what took place, I'm sure of it!"

Taine was not the man to waste time in useless words. Whenever he opened his mouth he had always something of importance to say, and his words, when apparently of the simplest kind, always had a serious meaning. Knowing this, the doctor had become more and more anxious as his companion's explanation proceeded. "Why do you tell me all this?" he asked impatiently. "Why don't you say at once, and in just as many words, that the whole thing is knocked on the head?"

"Because I don't think it is."

"Then what do you think?"

"I think it's seriously compromised, and that's a very different matter. When you play écarté, and your adversary has scored four points and you only one, do you throw down your cards and give up the game? By no means; you cling to them, on the contrary, and try to retrieve your position in the last deal."

The old clerk's impassive calmness now fairly exasperated worthy Dr. Hortebize. "But this is sheer folly," said he. "It's like suicide, like throwing oneself out of window."

Tantaine whistled sarcastically. "Then, may I ask," he said, "what would be the best course for us to pursue in your excellency's opinion?"

"I say unequivocally, give it all up. Abandon the whole scheme and plan another one which, if less lucrative, perhaps will also be less perilous. You expected to win the game; you had every reason, in fact, to think so. But now pocket your vanity, and make up your mind to lose it. You tried to crunch something that has proved too hard. Drop it, then; for if you persevere you'll break every tooth in your head. We've tried these people and found them too much for us, so let them be. After all, what does it really matter to us whether Mademoiselle de Mussidan marries De Croiseenois or De Breulh, or any one else? The speculation isn't there, fortunately. The productive idea—the idea of an enterprise to which everyone of our people must subscribe—still remains intact. We will work it up at once. But, at the same time, let us frankly confess our defeat on this present point, beat a retreat, and bury our dead." He stopped short, disconcerted by the expression he noticed on Tantaine's face. "It seems to me," continued the doctor in a wounded tone, "that my idea is not as ridiculous as you consider it. It strikes me as altogether reasonable."

"Perhaps so—but is it practicable?"

"I see no reason why it shouldn't be."

"Indeed! Then in your fright you look at the position through singular spectacles. We are too far advanced, my dear doctor, to be altogether our own masters. We must go on. The necessity for doing so is imperious. To retreat now would be simply to invite our enemies to pursue us. We are bound to fight anyhow, and battle for battle let us rather choose our own ground and attack. With equal forces the aggressor has eight chances out of ten in his favour; that's been proved."

"Words, mere words!" ejaculated Hortebize.

"Words, indeed! Were our revelations to Croiseenois mere words?"

This argument struck home, for the doctor started and exclaimed: "But you don't mean you think he'd betray us?"

"Why not, if it were his interest to do so? Reflect a moment. Croiseenois is at the end of his resources; we have dazzled him with the prospect of a princely fortune. Do you think he'd quietly submit if we said to him: 'We beg your pardon, we made a mistake. There's really nothing to be done. You are poor; remain so. We don't propose to help you?'"

"But it isn't necessary to say that. We could help him."

"And what would that lead us to? Do you wish to pay his debts, and his mortgages, defray all his expenses, and gratify all his extravagant tastes? Do you think he would limit his demands? Why, now that he has been let into our secrets, he holds us as much as we hold him. You will find that he has grasped our theories, and can levy blackmail as well as ourselves."

"Ah, already the other day," rejoined Dr. Hortebize moodily, "I thought it very imprudent on your part to tell him everything you did!"

"No; it was necessary to confide in some one. Besides, the Mussidan affair and the Champdoce affair are linked together. I conceived both schemes simultaneously, and they shall both of them succeed or fail."

"Then you persist?"

"Certainly; more than ever."

For some minutes the doctor had been rattling his medallion in an affected manner, which had certainly caught his companion's attention. Now, with a dreary smile, he exclaimed, "I swore long ago that our lives

should be bound together, that we should both succeed or come to grief, and I've no intention of retracting my words. March on, since you are so minded, and however perilous the road you so obstinately choose may seem to me, I'll follow you to the end of it—to the bitter end. I've something here which will, in some measure attenuate the catastrophe, when it comes—at least as regards myself. A contraction of the throat as when a man swallows a bitter pill, one quick convulsion, a little vertigo, a hiccup, and all will be over."

This uncomfortable precaution of the doctor's was peculiarly offensive to Tantaine at all junctures, and especially so at the present moment. "There, that'll do," he exclaimed, impatiently. "If the worst comes to the worst, and things turn out badly, use your medallion, if you choose; but, in the meantime, for heaven's sake, leave it in peace, and don't rattle it in that distracting way!" He rose from his chair with a look of annoyance, and stationing himself with his back to the fire resumed: "With men of our stamp a danger once known is a danger no longer. We are threatened and will defend ourselves. Woe to the man or woman who stands in my way! For I shall hesitate at nothing." He suddenly checked himself, opened each door in succession to satisfy himself that no one else was in the apartment, and then returning to the fire-place, proceeded in a low, hoarse voice: "Come, now, after all, there's but one sole obstacle in our path—one man only—that painter called André. If he were suppressed, our machinery would work perfectly well again."

Hortebize started as if he had been touched with a red-hot iron. "Do you mean to say—" he exclaimed.

Tantaine laughed: but his laugh was terrible to hear. "And why not? Isn't it better to kill the fellow than be killed by him?"

Dr. Hortebize was so utterly horrified that his teeth chattered. He did not object to say to people, "Your purse or your honour," but "Your purse or your life," was more than he was prepared for. "And if we were detected?" he gasped.

"Detected! that's nonsense. Suppose the crime committed. Justice would at once try to discover who had profited by it. Should we be thought of? Certainly not. It would be apparent that André's death would revive the chances of M. de Breulh for Sabine's hand—enable him, perhaps, to marry her, to marry the woman he worships, and whose heart André had stolen. Jealousy would explain everything. Do you understand me, doctor?"

"What! M. de Breulh would be charged? Horrible!" gasped Hortebize.

"Yes; I know that it's horrible, and I haven't the least desire in the world to go to this extremity. I only speak of it as a remote possibility which we may yet be driven to. Violence is always repugnant to me quite as much so as to yourself, and I hope that it won't be necessary—"

He stopped short, for at that moment the door opened and Paul came in, holding a letter in his hand. The young man seemed in the best of spirits, and shook hands with Dr. Hortebize and Tantaine most cordially. "I relied on this visit, gentlemen," he said, with the easiest air in the world, "but I didn't expect you quite so early, and I am truly thankful I took it into my head to come just now."

Tantaine smiled sarcastically, as he contrasted this gay indifference with Paul's condition the night before.

"Things are evidently going well with you," said the doctor.

"They are going so well, that I assure you I can find no possible reason for complaint."

"Have you given your lesson?"

"Yes, I have just left Madame Grandorge. What a charming woman she is. She treated me with the greatest possible kindness." If Paul had been utterly ignorant why Madame Grandorge received him, he would hardly have expressed himself otherwise.

"That being the case," rejoined the doctor, with a tinge of persiflage in his voice that Paul did not catch, "I can understand your satisfaction."

"Oh!" answered Paul, "I'm not so vain as you imagine. If I'm in such spirits it's for a more serious reason."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask what that might be?"

Paul assumed the grave and mysterious expression a youth generally affects when the love affair, which at that moment absorbs him, is touched upon. "I am not sure I have a right to tell you," he said.

"Upon my word! An adventure already!"

Paul smiled with consummate self-conceit.

"Keep your secret, my boy," said Tantaine.

This of course was just the thing to loosen the youth's tongue, as the astute old man had foreseen. "Oh! sir," Paul protested, "do you think it possible for me to keep a secret from you?" Then triumphantly waving the open letter he held in his hand; and watching the effect of his words, he continued: "The concierge gave me this letter when I came in. She said it was brought by a banker's boy. Can you guess where it comes from? Why from Mademoiselle Flavia Rigal, and it leaves me no doubt of her sentiments towards me."

"Is that really so?"

"Yes, it's just like that. Whenever I choose, Mademoiselle Flavia will become Madame Paul."

A flush came to old Tantaine's wrinkled cheeks, but faded away almost instantly. "And you are happy?" he asked, with a preceptible tremor in his voice, "very happy?"

The young fellow threw back his coat, and adjusting his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, carelessly replied: "Yes, of course I am. Oh! I didn't have much trouble, I assure you. Why, I had only been to M. Rigal's three times when Mademoiselle Flavia owned to me that she didn't dislike me."

As if Tantaine did not consider his spectacles sufficient to hide his feelings, he now carried his hands to his face.

"However," resumed Paul, "the last evening I saw Mademoiselle Flavia, she was dreadfully reserved and cold. Perhaps you think I tried to soften her—not at all. I said to myself, 'Let her be, my boy,' and came away much earlier than usual." The young fellow was not telling the truth. He had, in fact, felt frightfully uneasy. "And I did wisely, as the result has proved," he continued. "Poor girl! her coldness hurt herself. Just listen to what she writes." He tossed back his hair, assumed what he thought an imposing attitude, and then read the following letter aloud: "My friend—I was very naughty, and I repent. I could not sleep all night, for I was haunted by the grief I saw in your eyes when you left. Paul, it was a test—will you forgive me? I suffered much more than you could have done. Some one who loves me, alas! perhaps more than you do, has told me, over and over again, that when a young girl shows her whole heart to the man she loves, she risks her happiness. Is this true? I hope not, Paul; for never—no, never can I learn to feign; and in proof of this I am now going to tell you all. My father is the best and kindest of men, and

always does as I ask him ; so I am certain that if your friend—our dear Dr. Hortebize—came from you as the bearer of a certain request, it would not be refused. I am sure, too, that were I to join my prayers to his, the answer would be, Yes.’’

“ And this letter didn’t touch you ? ” asked Tantaine.

“ Of course it did ! Why, hasn’t she a dowry of a million ? ”

At these words Tantaine started up with so threatening a gesture that Paul recoiled wonderstruck by this unexpected display of anger.

But at a warning glance from Hortebize, the old man restrained himself.

“ If one only knew when he meant what he said,” he muttered. “ His very vices are feigned.”

“ Isn’t he our pupil ? ” asked the doctor, with a smile.

Tantaine, meanwhile, approached Paul, and laying his hand somewhat roughly on his head exclaimed, “ No, you will never know how much you owe to Mademoiselle Flavia, my boy.”

This scene impressed Paul the more strongly as he could in no degree grasp its meaning. These two men had done their very best to pervert him. They had laboured to achieve that result with all the power of their intellects, and yet now that he tried to put their lessons into practice, thus hoping to win their praise, they both looked at him with absolute contempt. However, before he had sufficiently recovered from his surprise to ask a question, Tantaine had mastered his emotion. “ My dear boy,” he said, “ I’m satisfied. I came to see you fearing you might be wavering.”

“ And yet, sir— ”

“ But let me tell you,” interrupted Tantaine, “ I find you strong and steady, much more so than I supposed possible.”

“ Yes, he has really made astonishing progress,” added the doctor, approvingly.

“ So much progress that it’s time to treat him like one of ourselves. To-night, my dear Paul, M. Mascarot will have obtained from Caroline Schimmel the solution of the enigma that has been puzzling him. Call at the agency, at two o’clock to-morrow afternoon, and you shall be told everything.”

Paul wished to ask two or three questions then and there, but Tantaine did not give him time. He interrupted him with a curt, imperative good-morning, and hurried off, dragging the doctor with him, looking like a man who wished to avoid a perilous or troublesome explanation. “ Let us go,” he whispered. “ Had I stopped, in another moment I should have knocked the miserable conceited fool flat upon the floor. Oh ! Flavia ! Flavia ! your folly of to-day will cost you tears of blood ! ”

The two associates were at the foot of the staircase before their *protégé* had recovered from his amazement. He still stood with parted lips, in the centre of his workroom—an excellent model for a statue of surprise and confusion. All the pride and vanity which had swelled his heart only a few minutes before had gone—evaporated, like the gas of a balloon that is pricked with a pin. “ I wonder,” he muttered, “ what that dastardly doctor and that odious old clerk are saying about me now. They are probably laughing at my simplicity and ridiculing my pretensions ! ” This thought exasperated him to such a degree that he ground his teeth in rage ; but he was mistaken, for neither the doctor nor Tantaine mentioned Paul’s name after leaving the house.

As they walked up the Rue Montmartre they were absorbed in thinking how they might most conveniently “ suppress ” that young painter André.

or at least render him powerless to thwart their designs. "As yet," said Tantine meditatively, "my information is far too vague for me to decide on the best course of action. My present tactics are to show no sign of life, and I have given directions to that effect to Croisenois; but I have hooked one of our agents on to each of our adversaries. André, De Breulh, and the viscountess will be unable to take a step without my knowledge. I have an ear at their doors, and an eye at their key-holes, even when they believe themselves most secure. I shall soon see their game clearly and then— But in the meantime trust to me and don't allow all this to worry you!"

They had now reached the boulevard, and Tantine stopped and drew out his huge silver watch. "Four o'clock," he cried, "how time flies! I must leave you, for I haven't a moment to lose. It's no time to sleep when one has milk on the fire. I have to go in ten different directions, and see if our 'observers' have anything to report."

"Shall I see you to-night?"

"It's scarcely likely, for I think I shall dine at one of the restaurants on the outer boulevards."

The doctor stared.

"Not for pleasure, as you may imagine, but I have a rendezvous at the *Grand Turc* with that scamp, Toto-Chupin. I must find Caroline, for I am convinced I can ascertain the Champdoce secret through her. No doubt she's discreet and cunning, and has been threatened with awful consequences, if she ever divulges the truth. But then she's partial to a glass, to a great many glasses, and I fancy I shall find out what's the best liquor to loosen her tongue. And now I'm off. I'll see you to-morrow at any rate."

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